

THE RUBICON

E·F·BENSON



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THE RUBICON

THAT evening the Professor of Ignorance sat long with paper spread before him, and with a pen in his hand, but he wrote nothing.

The window of his study looked out into the street, which was lit by many gas lamps. At length he dipped his pen into the ink, and wrote this :—

‘We should judge men by their best, not by their worst ; by their possibilities, not by their limitations.’

Next morning he read what he had written the night before, and smiled to himself.

‘I have seen that before,’ he thought.

He took a book from the little shelf that stood close to his right hand, and referred to it.

‘I am not quite sure that what I have written is true,’ he said.

The Professor of Ignorance.

THE RUBICON

BY

E. F. BENSON

AUTHOR OF 'DODO'

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THE RUBICON

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BOOK II—continued

CHAPTER IV

THE little grey ghost which visited Gertrude Carston in the early morning, soon became a *habitué* of her waking hours. He was a very importunate little ghost, and having once been given the *entrée*, he concluded that he was always welcome. But though he was unpleasant enough at the time, he was slightly medicinal in character, or rather, not so much medicinal as health-giving. He did not exactly correct existing defects, but opened fresh springs within her. So far, however, he was medicinal, in that he was operative after the dose, which always continued bitter to the taste. But the bitterness was a good bitterness, and occasioned not discontent with Reggie, but discontent with herself, and it is always worth a

good deal of bitterness to become wholesomely, not morbidly, discontented with oneself. She began to see in her nature unsuspected limitations, a thing quite as salutary, though not perhaps so pleasant, as the sight of unsuspected distances. A consciousness of unsuspected distance is liable to breed content, which is more injurious to the average mind—and she was quite average—than the discouraging discovery of a near horizon of unsuspected limitations, for the latter cause a revolt of something within us—which some call pride, and others spiritual aspiration—which refuses to acquiesce, and insists on those limitations becoming merely landmarks and milestones.

And, indeed, to see such a limitation is a long step towards correcting it. The young mind, to which growth is as natural as it is to the young body, if it has any of that irrepressible, unconscious elasticity, which is the main characteristic of its divine remoteness from age, will never acquiesce in a limitation it sees. It will, somehow or other, clamber over that horizon's rim, and though it may get many a fall, though it may be benighted and foot-sore and weary, that same divine youth-

fulness, which heals its physical fibres when they are bruised or cut, will repair its mental fibres. Its potentialities for recuperation are as strong as its refusal to be bounded. Youth may be crude, exaggerated, headstrong, but when the advocates of a temperate and bloodless senility have said all they can against it, they must confess that it is young.

What made this inward struggle so trying to Gertrude was, that she was unable, from the essential nature of it, to guess what was happening. All she knew was the sense of tangible limitations and dim tracts beyond, and an imperative necessity to flounder, as best she could, towards them. But she found much comfort in her love for Reggie, and in the knowledge of his love for her; she felt as if she was following some thin golden thread through a maze of bewildering twilight, but while that was secure in her hand, the maze and the twilight and the bewilderment were comparatively unimportant.

The Davenports had moved up to London in April, and Gertrude was with them again for a week before she went abroad to Aix with her

mother in May. Mrs Carston was a weak, fretful invalid, who always insisted on her daughter's cheerful and robust support while she went through a course of somewhat unnecessary baths and massages. The great city was just beginning to settle down to its great effort of amusing itself for three months, and the *Morning Post* recorded, morning by morning, some fresh additions to the big fair. The Davenports, in virtue of Mr Davenport's modest contribution to the task of governing the nation, had been duly entered on the books for the year, and their blinds in Grosvenor Square testified to the accuracy of the announcement.

Reggie and Gertrude were sitting in the dining-room about half-past ten one morning. Reggie was apt to treat breakfast as a movable feast, and this morning he had been out riding till after ten, and had only just come back. It was a hot, bright day, and he had taken the liberty, which had broadened down from precedent to custom, to ride in a straw hat. This particular straw hat was new, and had a very smart I. Z. ribbon round it, and Gertrude was seeing how it would look on her. She was suffering from a slight cold, and had not

gone out with him, but she found it pleasant enough to wait, after she had finished breakfast, and skim the daily papers till he returned.

She was deeply absorbed in the total disappearance of a French poodle when Reggie entered after dressing, and she laid down the paper to pour out tea for him.

‘The Row was fuller this morning,’ said he, ‘and the Parliamentary train was in great force.’

‘What’s the Parliamentary train?’

‘Oh! the string of people who walk up and down very slowly, with a row of grooms behind; you know the sort.’

‘Any one there you knew?’

‘Yes; several people. Gerty, give me another bit of sugar. Percy was there, looking for his sister. Apparently they’ve come back. Jim Armine was there too, also looking for Percy’s sister.’

‘Lady Hayes?’

‘Yes,’ said Reggie, eating steadily on. ‘I went and looked too. But we couldn’t find her. By the way, Percy wants us to go there to lunch.’

Gertrude had a sudden sense that all this had happened before, that she was going to act again

in a rather distasteful scene. She had a sudden, instinctive desire not to go there, a quite irrational dislike to the idea.

‘Oh! I can’t,’ she said. ‘I’ve got a cold.’

Reggie looked up innocently.

‘Oh! I’m so sorry for not asking. Is it worse? Poor dear!’

Gertrude had a quite unusual dislike of white, excusable lies.

‘No, it’s not worse; it’s rather better,’ she said.

‘Let’s go, then.’

‘Oh! I don’t want to, Reggie,’ she said. ‘I want to go to the concert at St James’. They’re going to do the Tannhäuser overture.’

‘That’s Wagner, isn’t it?’ said Reggie, doubtfully. ‘I think Wagner is ugly.’

‘Oh, you exceedingly foolish boy,’ said Gertrude. ‘You might as well call a storm at sea ugly.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Reggie, ‘I think it is hideous. Besides, I want to go to the Hayes’.

‘Oh, well, then you just sha’n’t,’ said Gertrude. ‘Really, I want to go awfully to this.’

‘But it’ll be much worse for your cold than going out to lunch.’

‘Oh, I give up my cold,’ said she. ‘I haven’t got one, really.’

Reggie ate marmalade attentively.

‘Do take me to the concert,’ said Gertrude. ‘I’m going away in two days. You can go and lunch with the Hayes then. It’s a waste of time going out to lunch.’

‘You see, I promised to go to the Hayes,’ he said.

‘Oh, nonsense! Send a note to say you have got to go to the concert. It’s quite true; you have got to go.’

‘Of course, if I have got to go—’ said he slowly.

‘That’s right. It begins at three, doesn’t it? No; don’t say we can do both, because it is quite impossible. You’re very good to me, Reggie.’

Gertrude felt intensely relieved, but she could not have told why. There had been something in the conversation she had held with Reggie, six months before, on the subject of Eva, which remained in her mind, and gave her a sense, not of danger, but of distrust. A sensitive mind need not, usually is not, the most analytical, and for this reason, to apply analysis to her unwillingness to see Eva, would yield either no results, or false

ones. There is an instinct in animals which enables them to discriminate between their friends and their foes, and the keener that instinct is, the more instantaneous it is in its working. The anatomist can tell us the action of the heart with almost absolute accuracy; he can say how the blood gets oxydised in the lungs, how it feeds the muscles and works the nerves—but the one thing he cannot tell us is, why it does so. And these instincts, like the action of the heart, can be noted and expressed, but the reason of their working we shall not know just yet. An action may be pulled to pieces like a flower, and divided into its component parts, and labelled with fifty crack-jaw names, but the life of the flower ceases not to be a delicate, insoluble mystery to us.

Reggie was very fond of music, but it was compatible, or rather essential, that his particular liking for it prompted him to say that Wagner seemed to him to be 'awfully ugly.' Nor was it such a far cry that he should assert, that same evening to Gertrude, that he had thought the 'Overture to Tannhäuser' 'awfully pretty.'

Gertrude had been rather silent as they drove

back. But something had prompted her to say to Reggie that evening, as they sat in the drawing-room before dinner,—

‘Ah! Reggie, I am so glad you are good.’

Reggie’s powers of analysis were easily baffled, and it is no wonder that he felt puzzled.

‘I don’t like bad people,’ he said.

‘Nor do I, a bit,’ said Gertrude. ‘I am glad you don’t, either. I thought of that this afternoon at the concert.’

‘Oh! I listened to the music,’ said Reggie. ‘I liked it awfully.’

‘Yes, I know, but it suggested that to me. Half of the overture—all that rippling part seemed so wicked. I think Wagner must have been a bad man. He evidently meant it to be much more attractive than the other.’

‘I don’t see how you can say some parts are wicked and some good. It’s all done on the fiddles, you know.’

Gertrude laughed.

‘I hope you’ll never understand, then,’ she said. ‘I prefer you as you are. After all, that matters a great deal.’

The gong had sounded, and Mrs Davenport, as she entered the room, heard the last words.

‘What doesn’t Reggie understand?’ she asked.

‘Gertrude said she thought some of the overture was wicked,’ said he, ‘and I said I didn’t know what she meant. Is it very stupid of me?’

Mrs Davenport looked up quickly at Gertrude.

‘No, dear; I think it’s very wise of you,’ she said.

Reggie jumped up.

‘I didn’t know I was ever wise,’ he said. ‘It’s really a delightful discovery. Thank you, mummy. Gerty, you’ll have to respect me for ever, now you know I’m wise. I shall invest in a sense of dignity.’

‘I never said you were wise,’ remarked Gertrude, ‘and I refuse to be responsible for any opinions but my own.’

‘Oh, I’ll be responsible,’ murmured Mrs Davenport.

Reggie looked from one to the other with the air of an intelligent dog.

‘I daresay it’s all right,’ he said, ‘but I don’t know what it’s all about.’

‘Oh! Reggie, you do understand,’ said Gertrude; ‘don’t be ridiculous.’

Reggie looked at her with the most genuine frankness.

‘I don’t understand a word, but I should like you to explain it very much.’

Gertrude frowned and turned away to greet Jim Armine, who was dining with them. The vague pain which she had felt before was with her now. Somehow, she and Reggie seemed to have got on to different levels. It was his moral, not his intellectual, understanding which appeared to her every now and then as almost entirely wanting. What puzzled her was that she had been entirely unconscious of any such defect till a few months ago, and her present knowledge of it struck her somehow as not being the natural outcome of increased intimacy, but rather as if her own moral understanding, by which she judged Reggie, had been developed and showed the want of it in him. But here again the vague instinctiveness of the feeling in her mind precluded analysis. All she knew was that she viewed things rather differently from him, and that this difference had not always been there. But pity is akin to love, and love, when joined with pity, is not less love, but love joined to the most human pro-

tective instinct, which, if anything, adds tenderness to passion.

Jim Armine had been lunching with the Hayes, and brought a minatory message for Reggie. Why had he said he would come to lunch and bring Miss Carston, and then never turned up.

Reggie behaved in the most unchivalrous manner.

‘It was all Gerty’s fault,’ he said. ‘She made me go to hear music.’

‘But you wrote to say so, didn’t you, Reggie?’

Reggie began to wish he had taken the blame on himself.

‘Yes, I *wrote*,’ he said.

‘And forgot to send it,’ interpolated Mrs Davenport. ‘Reggie, you are simply abominable. You must go and call, and explain.’

‘Oh, you can write a note to say how sorry you are,’ said Gertrude, suddenly.

The remark was insignificant enough, but to Gertrude it was the outcome of a feeling not at all insignificant. She felt as if she had inadvertently said something she did not mean to say, without reflecting that, to the others, the words were capable of a much less momentous inter-

pretation. She looked up quickly at Mrs Davenport, fearing for a moment that her self-betrayal was patent. Mrs Davenport also remembered at the moment a certain conversation which she and Gertrude had had one night some months ago, and their eyes met. That look puzzled the elder woman; she had not fathomed Gertrude's feeling on the subject of Lady Hayes, when she spoke to her about her, and the mystery remained still unsolved. The idea that Gertrude was in any way the prey of a jealous fear was too ridiculous to be entertained.

The Dowager Lady Hayes, who was staying with them, entered somewhat opportunely at this moment, followed by Mr Davenport, and they all went in to dinner. That veteran lady appeared to be in a state of mind which, when it occurs in children, is called fractiousness.

She always took a homœopathic dose in globular form before dinner, which was placed in a little wooden box by her place, but to-night the dose had not been set out, and she disconcerted everybody horribly by saying, during the first moment of silence, inevitable, when English people

meet to dine together, and in a voice of stentorian power,—

‘My dinner pills.’

A hurried consultation took place among the flunkies and, after a few moments’ search, the box was found, and handed to her on a salver. Old Lady Hayes held them up a moment and rattled them.

‘Pepsine,’ she announced; ‘obtained from the gastric juices of pigs. An ostrich couldn’t eat the food we eat, and at these hours, without suffering from indigestion. I would sooner eat a box of tin tacks than an ordinary English dinner at half-past eight, without my pepsine.’

Mrs Davenport cast a responsible eye over the *menu*, which, to the ordinary mind, appeared sufficiently innocent. She was always divided between the inclination to laugh and to be polite when dealing with Lady Hayes, which produced an inability to say anything.

Eva, as we have seen, adopted a different method; she neither laughed nor was she polite, but she was respectfully insolent, which is a very different matter. The utter indifference of her manner produced a

sort of chemical affinity in those widely-sundered qualities, just as electricity produces a chemical affinity between oxygen and hydrogen, which turns them into pure water, though both gases seem sufficiently remote, to the unchemical mind, from their product.

‘*Soufflé*,’ continued the dowager, glancing down the *menu*, ‘when composed of meat—that is, of nitrogenous substance—is utterly unsuitable to human food. It produces a distention—’

But Mrs Davenport broke in,—

‘Dear Lady Hayes, let me send for the wing of a chicken. I know you like chicken wing.’

A sigh resembling relief went round the table. Mrs Davenport had broken the charmed circle, who were waiting, like the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, for the unaccountable brimstone to descend on them. Reggie began to talk very rapidly about the Ascot Cup; Jim Armine engaged Mrs Davenport on the Irish question; and Mr Davenport, by way of transition, asked Lady Hayes whether gas was not very unhealthy.

But the subject of gas did not appear to interest the old lady. She wished to talk about something

else, and when she wished to do anything she did it.

‘My daughter-in-law—’ she began.

Reggie was still discussing, or rather enunciating, truths or untruths on the chances of Orme, and Lady Hayes’s words did not reach him. But Lady Hayes was accustomed to demand a universal deference and attention for her remarks. So she glared at Reggie, who soon caught her eye—it was impossible not to catch her eye very soon when it meant business—and subsided.

‘My daughter-in-law,’ repeated the dowager—‘whom I saw this afternoon, driving a dogcart in the Park—it was quite unheard of for a young woman to drive a dogcart alone when I was young—asked me to tell you all to keep Monday week open. She is sending out cards for a dance on that day—or rather she has sent them out, and she forgot to send them to you. Therefore I am a penny postman. She would be glad to see you all. Personally, I think the dances that are given now are simply disgusting. They are very unhealthy, because everyone sits up at the time when the ordinary evening fever sets in; that is, from twelve

to two. But I promised to give her message. I am responsible no further. And the cotillion is indecent.'

Mr Davenport made a bad matter worse.

'I am sure there will be none of that romping which you so rightly — ah! — dislike,' he said. 'I always think—'

But what Mr Davenport always thought will never be known, for her ladyship interrupted him.

'It is based on immorality,' she announced; 'it is an exhibition that would disgrace any Christian country, and more especially England.'

'Why especially England?' asked Jim, who was conscious of a challenge in her words.

'Because English people seem to pretend to a high morality more than any other nation.'

'And are you cruel enough to include your daughter-in-law in that category?' asked Jim.

'Eva Hayes is very English,' said the old lady.

'I am sure she never made any pretence of an exceptional morality,' remarked Jim, eating his nitrogenous food, and getting angry.

'No one would accuse her of being exceptionally moral.'

'I said she didn't make a pretence of it,' said Jim.

Mrs Davenport threw herself into the breach, and asked the dowager how digitalis was made.

Gertrude was sitting next Jim Armine, and wished to know more. Old Lady Hayes was well embarked on the structure of foxglove seeds, and she turned to Jim.

'You know Lady Hayes very well, don't you?' she asked.

'I was with them in Algiers last year.'

'Do you like her very much?'

'That's a wrong word to use, somehow,' he said. 'I think she is the cleverest woman I ever saw, and, perhaps, the most interesting,' he added, in a burst of veiled confidence.

'Ah!'—it was somewhat discouraging to hear that so many people took this as their main characteristic—'I don't know her at all. But I don't feel as if I should like her.'

'I believe women dislike her very much, as a rule,' remarked Jim, drily.

Something in his speech made Gertrude angry. It is always annoying, however modest an opinion

we may have of ourselves, to be classed as a probable example to an universal rule. She waited a moment before she answered him.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Well, there are very few people whom both women and men like much. Of course, I am not referring to the ordinary, stupid, good-natured people who are universal favourites—that is to say, whom no one dislikes—but to the people whom many men or women get excited about. She is one of those.’

Mrs Davenport was beginning to collect eyes—that is to say, she was looking at Gertrude, for no one could collect the dowager’s eyes—and Gertrude rose in obedience.

‘I think I know what you mean,’ she said.

Jim was left in excusable uncertainty as to what she meant, and the ladies left the room.

Mr Davenport sat down again with an air of relief.

‘I have always been considered a strong man,’ he said, ‘but, by the side of that old lady, I am a cripple and a baby. Get the cigarettes, Reggie.’

‘She told me that cigarettes were slow but certain

death, yesterday,' remarked Reggie, 'but she cannot make me rude to her. It would be such a pity.'

'Oh! she regards you as a possible convert,' said Jim. 'She hopes that you will go about with eight holes in your boots before long.'

'How does she get on with Percy's sister?' asked Reggie, innocently.

Jim Armine laughed.

'Didn't you know you were her ark? She got routed in several pitched battles, and retired precipitately.'

'That was when you were abroad last year, Reggie,' said Mr Davenport. 'She came here one day with her boxes and medicines, and asked us to take her in. She gave no reason; but Lady Hayes told your mother.'

'Was Lady Hayes so rude to her?'

Jim Armine laughed.

'She was so polite, on the contrary. Don't you know her?'

Gertrude went off next morning to meet Mrs Carston at Tunbridge, and go with her to Aix. Reggie went with her to Victoria, and had parting words on the platform.

‘I wish you were coming with me, Reggie,’ said Gertrude. ‘We’re going to Lucerne in a month from now, when mother has had her course. That will be towards the end of June. Do come. It is an awfully nice place, and you can go up mountains—or row if you like. Will you?’

Reggie thought it a brilliant and feasible idea.

‘I don’t care a bit about London,’ he said, ‘and I do happen to care about you. It will be lovely. Write to me just before you go there, and tell me the hotel, and so on. Of course, I’ll come. Ah! good-bye, Gerty.’

The train moved slowly out of the station, and Reggie was left standing on the platform, waiting for it to curl away into the dark arch which soon swallowed it up. He had lost a great deal, and he went home somewhat silently.

That evening there was a great reception at one of the Foreign Embassies. Mrs Davenport was the sister of the Ambassador’s wife, and, after dinner, she asked whether anybody was going with her. Her husband eschewed such festivities; like a sensible man, he preferred, he said, to sit quietly at home, than to stand wedged in among a crowd

of people who didn't care whether they saw him or not, and fight his way into a stuffy drawing-room. Reggie was sitting in the window, which he had thrown wide open, and was reading *The Field*. He had written a short note to Gertrude because he missed her, and as her bodily presence was not there, he felt it was something to communicate with her, but letter-writing was a difficulty to him, and the note had been very short.

An idea seemed to strike Mrs Davenport when she saw him.

'Reggie, why don't you come?'

'I'll come if you like. Will it be amusing? Yes; I should like to come. Let me smoke in the carriage, mummy.'

The two went downstairs together, and got into the carriage.

'Poor old boy,' said Mrs Davenport, laying her hand on his, 'you will feel rather lonely to-night. I thought you'd like to come.'

'It's an awful bore Gerty having to go away,' said Reggie, without any obvious discontent, 'but it's only for a month, you know. I'm going to join her at Lucerne, if you don't want me. I hope there's some-

thing to do there. She said there were some mountains about. I shall climb.'

Mrs Davenport was conscious of a slight chill.

'Well, there'll be Gerty there,' she said.

'Oh, yes; of course,' said Reggie. 'I shouldn't think of going if she wasn't there. You said I might smoke, didn't you?'

'I'm very happy about you and Gerty,' said Mrs Davenport, after a pause. 'I should have chosen her of all others for a daughter-in-law.'

'Oh! but I chose her first,' said Reggie. 'That's more important, isn't it? I wrote her a line this evening. I wish I didn't hate writing letters so. I can never think of anything to say. What do you say in letters, mother, you always write such good ones?'

'But you don't find it difficult to talk, Reggie. Why should you find it difficult to write?'

'Oh! but I do find it difficult to talk,' said he. 'It's dreadfully puzzling. I never talk to Gerty.'

'Are you always quite silent, then?'

'No; but I don't talk. At least, I suppose I do talk, in a way. I babble, you know. She does most of the talking.'

Mrs Davenport laughed.

‘Babble on paper, then,’ she said ; ‘Gerty will like it just as well.’

‘Oh ! but I can’t. It’s so silly if you put it down. Is this the Embassy ? I hope I shall meet a lot of people I know.’

Reggie’s common sense was enormous. Gertrude had gone away, and she wouldn’t come back for the wishing. He wished she had not gone very much, but here he was in England without her. Surely England without her was the same as England with her, except that she was not there. Her absence, from a practical point of view, did not take the taste out of everything else. How should it ? She was a very charming person, the most charming person Reggie had ever met. But there were other charming people, on a distinctly lower level, no doubt, but they did not cease to be charming because Gertrude had gone to Aix. After all, Reggie agreed with the great materialistic philosophers of all time, though he had never read their works. Mrs Davenport felt somewhat annoyed with this school of thought as she dismounted from the carriage.

The Embassy stood at the corner of a large square, and a broad, red carpet ran from the door across to the road, for royalty was expected. Inside the house the arrangements all corresponded with the magnificent promise of the red carpet. A row of gorgeous flunkies, a band in the hall beneath the stairs, several hundred pounds' worth of hot-house flowers banked up against the wall, a crowd of perfectly-dressed, bustling aristocrats, crowding up and staring, in the worst possible breeding, at a small space between two pillars, where three princesses were looking rather bored, and a similar number of princes were talking to the few who had managed, by dint of loyal shoves, to edge themselves into the august presences; the smiling host and hostess, the pleasant music of women's voices, crossing the somewhat sombre strains of the band below, all these things are the invariable concomitants of such festivities, and on the whole one crush is rather like another crush.

Mrs Davenport and Reggie had moved slowly up the staircase, and Reggie certainly was finding it amusing. There were lots of people he knew, and he stood chatting on the stairs while Mrs

Davenport talked for a few moments to her sister.

Later on he was standing in a doorway between two of the big reception-rooms, talking and laughing, and commanding, by reason of his height, a good deal of the room beyond, when he saw the crowd by the door opposite to him sway and move, as if a wind had passed over it; and through the room, plainly visible, for the crowd made way for her as she was walking with a prince, came a woman he had never seen before. She was tall, dressed in some pale, soft material; round her neck went a single row of diamonds, and above it rose a face for the like of which men have lived and died. Eva had a habit of looking over people's heads and noticing no one, but Reggie happened to be six foot three, and in his long, eager gaze was something that arrested Eva's attention. She looked at him fixedly and gravely, until the thing became absurd, and then she turned away with a laugh, and asked who that pretty boy was.

Reggie, when the spell of her look was broken, turned away too, and asked who the most beautiful woman in the world was.

‘There, there,’ he cried, pointing at her, regardless of men or manners.

So the great loom clashed and crossed, and two more threads were woven, side by side, into the garment of God.

CHAPTER V

THERE is a distinct tendency, if we may trust books on travels and early stages of religious belief among the uncivilised, dusky masses of the world, to assign every event to a direct supernatural influence. Certain savages, if they hit their foot against a stone, will say that there is a demon in that stone, and they hasten to appease him by sacrificial sops. We see the exact opposite of this among those nations which, like those in our own favoured isle, assign every event to pure chance. There is no harm in calling it chance, and there is no harm in assigning the most insignificant event to a local god, and the lesson we may learn from these elementary reflections is, that there are, at least, two points of view from which we may regard anything.

To adopt, however, the nomenclature of the day, this chance that led Lady Hayes to walk

down that room at the French Embassy, when Reggie was standing at the door, was a very big chance. One of the least important results of it was that it occasioned this book to be written.

Reggie was, as I have mentioned before, a very susceptible young man. He fully realised, *in propria personâ*, Mrs Davenport's 'healthy condition' of being in a chronic state of devotion, and this, coupled to his extreme susceptibility, will fully account for the fact that he moved slowly after Lady Hayes, till, by another chance meeting, she fell in with his mother, who had followed him from the top of the stairs, and got introduced. Mrs Davenport pronounced the mystic words, 'Lady Hayes, may I introduce my son Reggie?' and the thing was done.

Lady Hayes was amused to find herself so quickly introduced to the 'pretty boy' who had stared at her, and as her prince had gone away, she was ready to talk to him, and it appeared that he was ready to talk to her.

'I was so sorry I couldn't come to lunch yesterday,' he began, 'and I forgot to send a note to say I couldn't.'

'We have lunch every day,' remarked Lady Hayes, gravely. 'Come to-morrow. I shall think it very rude if you cut me again. So will Percy. I shall send him to call you out.'

'I know Percy very well,' said Reggie. 'I'm awfully fond of him. I don't believe he'd call me out.'

Eva looked at him again with some amusement. This particular type was somewhat new to her. He was so extraordinarily young.

'I'm very fond of Percy too,' she said.

'Oh, but he's your brother,' said Reggie.

'So he is.'

She laughed again.

'How extremely handsome he is,' she thought to herself, in a parenthesis. 'Why was I never so young as that.'

Then aloud,—

'I'm going to ask you to give me your arm, and take me to get something cold to drink. Do you like ices?' she asked with some experimental malice.

'Lemon water,' said Reggie after consideration, 'but not cream ices, they're stuffy, somehow. I'd

better tell my mother where we're going, and then I can meet her again afterwards.'

'Ah! Lady Hayes,' exclaimed the voice of their host's brother, 'I've been looking for you. Prince Waldenech wishes to be introduced to you. Adeline sent me to find you.'

Lady Hayes raised her eyebrows.

'I'll come by-and-by,' she said. 'I can't now. I'm going to eat an ice-lemon-water. Tell her I will be back soon—ten minutes.'

'Prince Waldenech's just going.'

'Then I am afraid it will be a pleasure deferred for me. Come, Mr Davenport. You shall have a lemon-water-ice, and so will I.'

'That was very kind of you to keep your engagement to me,' said Reggie.

'You deserved I should cut you, as you cut me yesterday. But I felt inclined to keep this engagement, which makes all the difference. Of course, if you'd felt inclined to come yesterday you wouldn't have forgotten. One never forgets things one likes.'

'Oh, but I did feel inclined to come,' said Reggie, and stopped short.

‘It was self-denial, was it?’

‘No, I was wanted to do something else.’

‘What did you do else, if it isn’t rude to ask?’

‘Oh! I went to the concert at St James’. They did the Tannhäuser overture.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘Oh yes, it was awfully pretty.’

Eva laughed again.

‘I expected you would think it stupid or ugly.’

‘How did you know?’ asked he.

‘You told me yourself. I knew almost as soon as you began to speak. Never mind. Don’t look so puzzled. You shall come to the opera some night with me, and hear it again. I’m dreadfully rude, am I not?’

‘You rude! No!’ said Reggie, stoutly. ‘But you mustn’t mind my being stupid.’

‘I like stupid people.’

‘I should have thought you would have hated them. But I’m glad you like them,’ said he, blushing furiously.

‘What pretty speeches! But you are quite wrong about my hating stupid people—I don’t say you’re stupid, you know,—but in the abstract.

You see I know much more about you already than you know about me. I was right about you're thinking Wagner ugly, and you were wrong about my disliking stupid people. There's the buffet. I shall sit down here, and you shall bring two ices—one for yourself and one for me.'

It was characteristic of Reggie that he wrote an effusive though short note to Gertrude next day, saying that he had met Lady Hayes at the French Embassy, that she was perfectly beautiful and awfully nice, and that he couldn't write any more because he was just going out to lunch with her, and that three days after this another short note followed this one, saying that Lady Hayes was awfully anxious to meet her — Gertrude,— that Gertrude must come home as quick as ever she could, and that Mrs Arbuthnot was going to Lucerne in July, so that, if Mrs Carston could join her there, Gertrude could come straight home. He had heard that Lucerne was very slow.

Lady Hayes had been 'awfully nice' to Reggie. She had hardly ever seen anything so fresh as he was. About two days after their first meeting, Reggie had told her, with unblushing candour, all

about Gertrude, and Lady Hayes was charmed to hear it. Reggie's confession of his young love seemed simply delightful. He was so refreshingly unversed in the ways of the world. He had spoken of Gertrude with immense ardour, and had shown Lady Hayes her photograph. He had been there to call one afternoon, and had found her alone. They had tea in the little tent over the porch, which Eva kept there '*en permanence*,' and in which she had routed her mother-in-law a year ago.

She was sitting in a low, basket-chair, looking at the photograph, which Reggie had just put into her hand, and had turned from it to his eager, down-looking face, which appeared very attractive.

'Charming,' she said, 'simply charming! You will let me have this, won't you? and one of yourself, too, and they shall go on the chimney-piece in my room. Really, you have no business to be as happy as this; it isn't at all fair.'

Reggie stood up, and drew in a long breath.

'Yes; I'm awfully happy. I never knew anyone as happy as I am. But may I send you

another photograph of her? I can get one from the photographer. You see, she gave me this herself.'

'No; certainly not,' said Eva. 'I want this one. I want it now. Surely you have no need of photographs. You have got the original, you see. And this is signed by her.'

'Oh! but I'm sure she'd sign another one for you, if I ask her to.'

'If it please my lord the king,' said Eva. 'No; I want this one. Mayn't I have it?'

'Yes, it doesn't make any difference, does it?' said Reggie, guilelessly. 'I've got the original, as you say.'

'Thanks so much. That is very good of you.'

'Of course it's an exchange,' said Reggie.

'Ah, you're mercenary after all. I knew I should find a weak point in you. Very good, it's an exchange. But I don't suppose Miss Carston would care for my photograph. She doesn't know me, you see.'

'Well, anyhow, mine must be an exchange.'

'You're very bold,' said Eva. 'Of course you could make me give it you; you're much stronger

than I am. If you held me down in this chair, and throttled me until I promised, I should have to promise. I'm very cowardly. I should never have made an early Christian martyr. I should have sworn to believe in every heathen goddess, and the Thirty-Nine Articles long before they put the thumbscrew really on.'

'Yes, I expect the thumbscrew hurt,' said Reggie, meditatively.

'Don't you miss her tremendously?' said Eva, looking at the photograph again. 'I should think you were miserable without her.'

'Oh, I don't think I could be miserable if I tried,' said Reggie.

'Most people find it so easy to be miserable. But I don't think you're like most people.'

'I certainly don't find it easy to be miserable; not natural, at least. You see, Gerty's only away for a month, and it wouldn't do the slightest good if I was miserable.'

'You have great common sense. Really, common sense is one of the rarest things in the world. Ah, Hayes, that is you, is it? Do you know Mr Reggie Davenport?'

Lord Hayes made a neat little bow, and took some tea.

‘There is a footman waiting to know if you were in,’ he said. ‘Somebody has called.’

‘Please tell the man that I’m not in, or that I’m engaged.’

Reggie started up.

‘Why didn’t you tell me to go?’ he said. ‘I’m afraid I’ve been here an awful time.’

‘Sit down again,’ said Eva. ‘You are my engagement. I don’t want you to go at all.’

Reggie sat down again.

‘Thank you so much,’ he said.

‘There has been,’ said Lord Hayes, stirring his tea,—‘there has been a most destructive earthquake in Zante. The town, apparently, has been completely demolished.’

Reggie tried to look interested, and said,—‘Indeed.’

‘Do you know where Zante is?’ asked Eva. ‘I don’t.’

‘I think it’s in the Levant,’ said Reggie.

‘That makes it worse.’

‘Zante is off the west coast of Greece,’ said Lord

Hayes. 'I was thinking at one time of building a villa there.'

'Ah,' said Eva, 'that would be charming. Have you finished your tea, Hayes? Perhaps you would order the carriage for to-night. I have to go out at half-past ten. You must find it draughty here with your bad cold. You would be prudent to sit indoors.'

Reggie looked at him with sympathy as he went inside.

'I'm sorry he's got a cold,' he said.

'It is an intermittent catarrh,' said Eva, with amusement. 'There is nothing to be anxious about—thanks.'

Lord Hayes had gone indoors without protest or remonstrance, but he was far from not feeling both. The polite indifference which Eva had practised earlier in their married life—the neutral attitude—had begun to wear very thin. When they were alone, he did not care much whether she was polite or not, but he distinctly objected to be made a fool of in public. Why he had not made a stand on this occasion, and insisted that he had no cold at all, which was indeed the case, he found himself wonder-

ing, even as he was making his retreat, but that wonder brought him no nearer to doing it. Investigation into mesmerism and other occult phenomena are bringing us nearer a rational perception of such forces, and we are beginning to believe that each man has a set of moral muscles, which exercise moral force, just as he has a similar physical system which is superior or inferior to that of another man. And to judge by any analogy which is known to us, it appears inevitable that when one moral organisation strips as it were to another moral organisation, that a fight, a victory and a defeat will be the result.

Eva's prize fight with her husband had lasted more than a year, and though it was practically over, yet the defeated party still delivered itself of small protests from time to time, which resembled those anonymous challenges, or challenges in which it is not distinctly stated that 'business is meant,' and which are common in the columns of such periodicals as register the more palpable sort of encounters.

Lord Hayes, in fact, still preserved his malignant potentialities. It was a source of satisfaction to

him that he still retained a slight power of annoying Eva in small ways. This he did not venture to use in public, because, if Eva suspected anything like a whisper of a challenge not strictly in private, she would take steps to investigate it, and these public investigations were not to his taste. But in private he could vent a little malignity without being publicly pommelled for it.

Thus it came about that, when they were seated at dinner alone that night, Lord Hayes said,—

‘May I ask who that young man was with you? He was here yesterday, I believe.’

‘Didn’t I introduce you?’ said Eva. ‘I thought I did. It was Reggie Davenport.’

‘What do you intend to do with him?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Is it to be a sort of Jim Armine the second?’

Eva finished eating her soufflé without replying, and Lord Hayes rather prematurely thought the shot had told.

‘Oh! dear no,’ she said at length, ‘nothing of the sort. I am very fond of Reggie Davenport. Quite devoted to him, in fact. He is quite the nicest young man I ever saw.’

‘I thought you were very fond of Jim.’

‘How dull men are,’ said Eva. ‘Any woman would have seen at once that it was he who was fond of me. But with Reggie—he asked me to call him Reggie—it is reciprocal, I think. I should advise you to be jealous.’

‘I should not think of such a thing,’ said he. ‘Nothing makes a man so ridiculous as to be jealous.’

‘Except, perhaps, to be complaisant,’ said Eva, not sparing herself in the desire not to spare him. ‘I think that is absurder still.’

‘I have no intention of being complaisant.’

‘That is such a comfort,’ said Eva; ‘it is a great thing to know that one’s honour is safe in one’s husband’s hands. You are my guardian angel. Are you coming to the ball to-night? Yes? I shall be upstairs in my room. Please send a man to tell me when the carriage is round. And don’t keep me waiting as you did on Thursday.’

Eva went upstairs into her room, and found, among her letters, Reggie’s photograph, which he had already sent. She took it up and looked at it for a few moments, and placed it by the side of

Gertrude's. Something, perhaps the scene at dinner, had made her restless, and she walked up and down the room, with her long, white dress sweeping the ground behind her.

'What is the matter with me?' she thought to herself impatiently. 'Surely I, of all people—'

She sat down again and opened some of her letters. There was one from her mother, who was coming to stay with them for a week or two.

'I hear such a lot about you,' she wrote; 'everyone seems to be talking about nothing else except Lady Hayes and her beauty and success. And when I think that it is my own darling little Eva, I can only feel full of gratitude and thankfulness that a mother's prayers for her own daughter's welfare have been answered so fully and bountifully. But I hope that, in the riches of love and position and success, which have been so fully granted her, she will not forget—'

Eva tore the letter in half with a sudden, dramatic gesture, and threw it into the paper-basket. She was annoyed, ashamed of herself for her want of self-control, but a new spring of feeling had been rising in her this last day or two, that gave her a

sense of loss, of something missed which might never come again, a feeling which she had experienced in some degree after her marriage, when she found out what it was to be linked to a man who did not love her, and whom she was beginning to detest. But now the feeling was deeper, keener, more painful, and from the mantelpiece Reggie's photograph looked at her, smiling, well-bred, well-dressed, and astonishingly young. Surely it couldn't be that!

An hour later a message came that the carriage was round, and she went downstairs again, impassive, cold, perfectly beautiful. As she swept down into the hall, Lord Hayes, who was standing there, with a pair of white kid gloves in his hand, was suddenly struck and astonished at her beauty. He felt freshly proud at having become the owner of this dazzling, perfect piece of life. He moved forward to meet her, and in a burst of pleased proprietorship, laying his hand on her bare arm,—

‘My dear Eva,’ he said, ‘you are more beautiful than ever.’

Eva looked at him for a moment fixedly; then she suddenly shook his hand off.

‘Ah! don’t touch me,’ she said shuddering, and moved past him and got into the carriage.

Lord Hayes, however, had one consolation which Eva could never deprive him of, and that was the knowledge that she was his, and the knowledge that she knew it. She might writhe and shrink, or treat him with indifference, or scorn, or anger, but she could never alter that, except by disgracing herself, and she was too proud and sensitive, as he knew, to do anything of the sort. Consequently, her assaults on him at dinner on the subject of complaisance did not trouble him for a moment. It was morally impossible, he felt, for her to put him into such a position, for her own position was as dear to her as he was odious. His lordship had a certain cynical sense of humour, which whispered that though this state of things was not pleasant, it was distinctly amusing.

Meantime, as the days went on, if Eva was beginning to be a little anxious about herself, Mrs Davenport was not at her ease about Reggie. Gertrude’s letters came regularly, and he liked to let his mother read them, and they, at any rate, betrayed no dissatisfaction. But in one of these

which arrived soon after the last interview recorded between Lady Hayes and Reggie, Mrs Davenport suddenly felt frightened. It was a very short sentence which gave rise to this feeling, and apparently a very innocent one:—

‘What on earth does Lady Hayes want my photograph for?’

Reggie was sitting by the open window after a particularly late breakfast, smoking into the window box. His back was turned to the room, and he was apparently absorbed in his occupation. He had read Gertrude’s letter as he was having breakfast, and when he had finished, he had given it to his mother, saying,—

‘Such a jolly note from Gerty; you will like to see it, mummy.’

Mrs Davenport read it, and looked up with some impatience at the lounging figure in the window seat.

‘What’s this about Gerty’s photograph and Lady Hayes?’ she asked. ‘I don’t understand.’

Reggie did not appear to hear, and continued persecuting a small, green fly that was airing itself on a red geranium, and was consequently conspicuous.

'You may smoke in here, Reggie,' said Mrs Davenport, raising her voice a little; 'come in and sit down.'

Reggie turned round somewhat unwillingly. He had heard his mother's first question, and it had suddenly struck him that it was rather an awkward one. A very frank nature will, on occasions, use extreme frankness to cover the deficiency of it, and he decided that the whole truth, very openly stated, was less liable to involve him in difficulties than the subtlest prevarication.

'Oh, Lady Hayes said she wanted Gerty's photograph and mine,' he said, walking towards his mother. 'Of course, I gave them her, and she gave me hers in exchange. I told Gerty all about it in a letter.'

Mrs Davenport looked up at him, and observed that his face was flushed.

'What an odd request,' she said.

'I don't see why. I know her quite well, somehow, though I have only known her such a short time.'

There was a short silence. Mrs Davenport was casting about in her mind as to how she might

learn what she wanted, without betraying her desire to know it.

‘Did you write to Gerty yesterday?’ she asked at length.

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Reggie, frankly. ‘I was out all day and then I went to the Hayes in the evening.’

‘Are you going out to Lucerne at the end of the month?’

‘No, I think not; somebody told me—Lady Hayes, I think—that it was awfully slow. I told Gerty the Arbutlotts were going out, and suggested she should leave Mrs Carston with them and come back to London. I like London, somehow, this year.’

Mrs Davenport was beginning to understand. She could have found it in her heart at that moment to label Eva with some names that would have astonished her.

‘Does Lady Hayes talk about Gerty much?’

‘Oh, yes, a good deal; at least, she lets me talk about her whenever I want to.’

‘Is that a good deal?’

Reggie frowned. He had been acting for this last

week or so with such spontaneity, obeying so instantaneously his inclinations, that he found it hard to answer questions about these things. It is always harder to recall what we have done unthinkingly, than what has been the result of thought or conscious effort.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘We talk about her now and then, but we talk about a thousand things. I don’t know what you mean. Lady Hayes said the other day that she was sure Gerty would detest her.’

‘I think Lady Hayes is probably quite right.’

‘Then it would be very unreasonable of Gerty,’ said Reggie, frowning again, ‘and I don’t know why you think so. Why should Gerty detest her?’

‘Does she strike you as the sort of woman Gerty would like?’

‘I don’t think I ever thought about it till Lady Hayes mentioned it, and I disagreed with her.’

‘You told me the other day that you and Gerty agreed that you only liked good people. I don’t think Gerty would think her good.’

Reggie flushed angrily.

‘I don’t really see what you are driving at,’ he said, rather vehemently, because he did see. ‘I think I won’t talk about her any more if you don’t mind, mummy. You see she’s very kind and delightful to me, and that’s all that I have any right to judge by, and I’m sure she’d be just as nice to Gerty.’

He sauntered out of the room with rather exaggerated slowness, feeling a little uneasy. He was just conscious that this new element which had come into his life was a very absorbing one, and he wondered a little how absorbing it was in proportion to other things. Eva showed to him a different side to that she showed to the world; she was careful when he was there not to say quite what she was in the habit of saying when she was with others. She regarded him as a child—a very charming, delightful child—and she knew that the greatest respect, as one of the most finished artists of human life has said, was due to children. In fact, according to his data, Reggie’s glowing, adoring picture of her was faithful enough. Why Eva behaved like that to him is a question which concerned her alone,

and of which the answer was even now working out in her mind. She had tried the world for two years, and had found it distinctly wanting. It amused her at times, but it bored her more frequently. The frantic interest which she had taken in men and women was beginning to pall a little; even the interest she had taken in herself was not so deep as it had been. It must be remembered that the world, as she knew it, was a certain section of society which, however much its units differ in individuality, is, to a certain extent, all dulled and choked in the limitations of its class, the inexorable need to be well dressed, to be successful, to be smart. Diversity of interest is the only thing that will make interest long lived; and diversity was exactly what was wanting. The gossip, the whispered scandals, the scheming, the jostling, were new to her at first, and she had drunk them down eagerly, but in her heart of hearts she knew that she was just a little tired of it all, and she was beginning to behave as others behaved, not because it was the most amusing thing that could be done, but because others behaved so. On this stale, gas-lit atmosphere Reggie had come like

a whiff of fresh air. He had not the smallest interest in scandal or gossip, or any of those things in which her world found its entire interest settled. He was new, he was fresh, and he was young.

Just now that meant a good deal to Eva, for it was the type to her of all she had missed. He was, again, distinctly of her own class—he could not offend the most fastidious taste—Eva would never have cultivated a grocer's assistant, however fresh—and he was extremely handsome and attractive in appearance. Her feeling for him was made out of one large factor, and several small ones; for his pleasant manner, his frank good breeding, his beauty, she liked him; for his serene, stainless youth she had a sort of liking that was quite new to her.

That the conception he had formed of her was very far from representing her, she knew well. She had deliberately held the reckless, cynical, unprincipled part of her nature rigorously in check when she was with him. She was sympathetic, simple, divinely kind to him, because she liked him so much and knew that he would detest the other half of her. But now a mixture of motives led her to determine to let him know all. It had come to this, that she

felt that inevitable longing to throw her nature open to him, to drop this elaborate suppression, to let him see her as she was, and judge her. Our deeper emotions are thickly entwined with the fibres of honesty, which makes even those, who are least honest in ordinary life, scrupulously truthful and open when those deeper emotions are touched. To say that Eva was in love with Reggie would be both overstating it and understating it. He was the symbol to her of her lost ideals, which she found she had loved now she had lost them; and, humanly speaking, she found him very attractive as a substantial embodiment of these.

Eva was sitting in her room one morning, a few days after the talk Reggie had had with his mother, wondering how she had better carry her resolve out, when an idea struck her. She got up and wrote a short note to him:—

‘I wonder if you would care to come to the opera to-night with me,’ she said. ‘Tannhäuser is being played, and I think I remember your saying you thought the overture very pretty. Do come. Dine here first.’

‘Jim Armine shall come too,’ thought Eva. ‘He shall chaperon us. Besides, I can’t be worldly all alone with Reggie. I must have some one to be worldly with. Decidedly that is the best plan.’

CHAPTER VI

THE opera began at half-past eight, and Eva, in her note to Reggie, had mentioned 'seven sharp' as the hour for dinner, because she wanted to hear the overture. Reggie had routed up an 'arrangement' of the music that afternoon, and had got his mother to play it to him, but whether it was that Mrs Davenport's musical education had been conducted in her youth on the same principles of æsthetics that used to instil into the young idea the system of 'touches' to indicate foliage, or that Reggie did not attend much—in any case, he pronounced it totally unintelligible, and, in his mind, reconsidered his previous verdict of it.

Reggie's 'seven sharp' partook of the nature of 'seven,' but in a less degree of the nature of 'sharp,' and Jim Armine had already arrived and was talking to Eva. As he opened the door—he was al-

ready sufficiently at home to dispense with the formula of being shown up—Eva felt her resolve waver, but determined, if she could, to do what she had intended. She wheeled her chair a few inches further round, so as to be with her back to the door, and began talking in a hard, cold voice.

‘Of course, there will be a tremendous scandal about it,’ she said to Jim, ‘but you know what the woman is like. Didn’t you see her here a fortnight ago? Hayes thought her divine. Of course, men are always blind in such matters. If a woman is beautiful enough, they think she must be good. Now, women do just the opposite. If a woman is beautiful enough, they think she must be a villain. They are, probably, much more likely to be right than men. Ah! Reggie, you’ve come, have you? I know what your seven sharp is.’

Reggie shook hands with her, and looked inquiring.

‘Whom were you talking about?’ he demanded.

‘Oh! it would have been applicable to most women,’ said Eva. ‘There has been, or will be, a tremendous scandal about most of us, and it seems to me that most women have been here

during this last fortnight. We have been having a week of parties, and Hayes will have to sell one of his villas, I expect. The parties have all been very stupid, but so are the villas, for that matter. Come, let's go in to dinner. Which of you gentlemen will take me in? You're the nephew of a marquis, are you not, Jim? Then you shall go in first, and Reggie and I will follow.'

'I've been making my mother play the overture to me,' remarked Reggie, as they sat down, 'and I can't understand a note of it.'

'Oh! the overture is the epitome to the play,' said Eva; 'you have to know the plot, and then the overture is easy enough. Let's see, I'll give you a little sketch of it. Tannhäuser is a good young man, Reggie—something like you—and he goes to Venusberg. Well, Venusberg is not at all the place for a good young man. There is no propriety of any sort observed there, and they are very lax about etiquette and other things. Never go to Venusberg, Reggie, or, if you do, take Mrs Reggie with you. If she won't come—and I don't expect she will—you had better not go at all. It is said to be very unsettling.'

Jim Armine laughed. Lady Hayes was inclined to be talkative, and he always thought it worth while listening to her when she was talkative, because she always had something to say whenever she said anything. He wondered a little why she had taken it into her head to say this just now, but she always talked with a purpose, and he was content to assume the purpose. But Reggie was wofully puzzled. He had not known her like this, and he very much wanted explanations.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘You know I’m very stupid. Do tell me what you mean.’

Eva cast one look at his anxious, frowning face, and trifled with her fish.

‘I must do it,’ she said to herself; ‘I cannot let things continue as they have been.’

‘Oh! it gets easier further on,’ she continued, ‘as Humpty Dumpty said; and you’ll understand it all when you hear the overture again, according to your new lights. Of course, the Venusberg is only an interlude in Tannhäuser’s life, and everyone has interludes in their lives, or else they would not be human. Tannhäuser is a pilgrim, and the pilgrims march about to slow music all the time. Venus, of

course, does not go about to slow music—quite the contrary, in fact; and, when you hear the two together, the contrast is very striking. Tannhäuser goes away from Venusberg, you know before the end, and dies in the odour of sanctity.

Eva stopped for a moment, and Jim Armine laughed again.

‘You are admirably lucid,’ he said. ‘You seldom explain yourself so well.’

‘Thanks for the compliment,’ said Eva. ‘And you, Reggie, do you find me lucid?’

Reggie was listening to her with a puzzled air.

‘I expect I shall understand better when I’ve seen it,’ he said.

‘Yes; you can’t fail to understand it then,’ said Eva, ‘or, if you don’t, you will be even more charming than I thought you. I wonder if you are capable of it. I am talking nonsense to-night; you must forget it to-morrow.’

‘As long as you remember it just during the opera,’ said Jim maliciously.

Eva’s mind was thoroughly made up, and she choked the rising misgivings.

'He must know some time,' she thought, 'and it is best I should tell him.'

'You are going to be Adam in the garden of Eden, possibly for the last time,' she said with mock solemnity, which covered her own earnestness; 'to-night the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will be offered you—'

'By the woman?' asked Jim, indicating Eva.

'On the contrary,' said she, 'by Augustus Harris. Every man since Adam has had it offered him sooner or later, Reggie, and the majority of them eat it. The apple, in this case, is Tannhäuser, accompanied by my comments on it. It's a funny sort of apple. I'm giving you the core first, which is rather dry, probably, and the fruit comes afterwards, like dessert after savouries.'

'The core is rather hard,' remarked Reggie unceremoniously.

'Oh, it will taste quite different when you chew it up with the fruit.'

'Give us some more of the core,' asked Jim.

'Well, there's Venus, of course,' said Eva, 'about whom I haven't told you anything yet. She is just the opposite to the pilgrim's march; she re-

gards things from an entirely different standpoint, you know. I'm always a little sorry for Venus. Tannhäuser goes away just when she has got very fond of him.'

Eva stopped a moment and looked at Reggie.

'But, of course, you mustn't consider her at all. Tannhäuser is usually done on Saturdays, you know, and Venus would not go at all well with Sunday morning service. Poor dear, how the Litany would bore her! She stops in the porch, when you go into church, and when you come out she is gone. She hasn't gone, really, you know; she is only having a stroll, and she always comes back, very often before Monday. If she doesn't come back, most men go to look for her, and they usually find her again.'

Reggie stifled a sudden sense of misgiving with staunch loyalty, and smiled at Eva.

'I told you I was stupid,' he said, 'the first time I saw you, and I confess to being absolutely stupid now. I don't understand you a bit.'

Jim regarded Reggie as a successful interloper, and could not resist the temptation to be slightly malicious.

‘After all, it is the most delightful thing in the world to be able to keep up our mysteries,’ he said. ‘Nothing intelligible is so charming as what is mysterious. When you understand anything, the charm is gone.’

‘Nonsense, Jim,’ said Eva; ‘don’t pay any attention to what he says, Reggie. It is very easy to be unintelligible.’

‘Yes, it seems to be,’ said Reggie, rather absently, but resenting Jim’s remark, which savoured of patronising.

Eva laughed.

‘You won’t get any change out of him, Jim,’ she said. ‘He has often assured me he is very stupid, which no stupid person is capable of doing. I must go and put on a cloak. There is just time for you to smoke a cigarette before the carriage comes.’

Eva got up and left the room, and Reggie lit a cigarette, and strolled to the window. He had no particular liking for Jim Armine, and Eva’s words had disturbed him. He was growing more conscious of the fact that his life was beginning to find a new centre and a mystery which was

quite new to it. His strong, genuine liking and admiration for Gertrude had not diminished a whit, but he did not conceal from himself that he thought with more excitement about Eva. But he felt himself able to retain both these interests without any sense of compromise. He was engaged to marry Gertrude, and he would have been genuinely puzzled if it had been suggested to him that such an engagement, to some minds, limited his liberty in becoming indefinitely interested in another woman. In fact, the extreme simplicity of his character appeared to be going to land him among some perilously complicated and unknown shoals. He was young, ardent and unreflective, and these divine gifts are capable of dealing back-handed blows in the most inopportune and unexpected ways.

But Eva's words this evening had startled and perplexed him, and his bewilderment was touched with distrust. He expected, as Eva had told him, to find the key to his perplexity in the opera to-night, and he half realised that the explanation might be appallingly significant. Years afterwards he remembered those few minutes, which he spent

looking out of the window, with much greater clearness than he remembered what followed. A mental, like a physical shock, often produces a dimness in the memory. Men who have been in great peril of death will remember with great vividness the most insignificant circumstances just before that peril; how they were walking round the slippery corner of rocks coated with ice, how a little purple gentian grew just above the crevice where they found a handhold, how at their feet was a trickle of water, where the sun had melted the snow. Then came the slip, and the activity of the mind seems suddenly quiescent. As they slid powerlessly down the icy stair, they noticed nothing, even the bitterness of death was passed—they were inanimate arrows from the bow of natural laws.

In the same way the little details of those few minutes when he waited for Eva to put on her opera cloak were engraved indelibly on Reggie's mind. Years afterwards the faint, acrid smell of red geraniums brought back the whole evening with a throb of sudden awakening. The window was open, and the flower-box outside was in full scent and colour. A canary creeper climbed the trellis-

work at the sides of the windows, and twined its green, muscular stalks round the painted wooden squares. Between, a row of gaudy geraniums grew up from a groundwork of low mignonette, not yet in full flower, and in the front of the box a fringe of dark blue lobelias shivered on their hair-like stalks in the evening air. Beyond lay the grimy, dusty, square garden, and over the road, between the house and it, bowled silent, smooth-running carriages, within which he caught sight of the shimmering of silk and jewels, and over all brooded the hot, weary sky, exhausted with the long, sultry hours, but beginning to grow a little more serene, a little less stifled in the cool of the evening.

Reggie looked at these things not knowing he was noticing them, and forbearing to guess what Eva meant. He was surprised to hear the door in the room behind open, and to find that Eva was ready, and his cigarette was nearly smoked out. He had not thought that she had been gone more than a few seconds.

‘Well, Reggie,’ she said, ‘have you been thinking it all over? Are you prepared for the great

change. I think it is coming to-night, but, of course, there is nothing so easy as prophesying, and nothing so inconclusive. Well! we shall see. At present the carriage is waiting, and we must be off.'

It was still early when they arrived at the opera house, and the orchestra were just beginning to tune up. The house was still comparatively empty, but it was beginning to fill rapidly, for all London had suddenly discovered that Wagner was worth listening to, and that an overture was not necessarily as dispensable as a preface.

But at last the tuning was over, the violins had caught their A's correctly, and had hit the 'four perfect fifths,' the drums had been screwed up to the necessary tension, and the wind instruments were in their places, pregnant with the miraculous birth of sound. For these five strings, these tubes of brass were going not to interpret, but to present the actual mysteries which passed through the artist's brain. Music is, as it were, the speaker in the first person, whereas painting only deals with the vision second-hand. The painter represents a blaze of light by certain pigments—yellow, red, white—but these are only the symbols of

what he wishes to tell us. He may not take liquid sunlight and place it on the canvas. His art is but a symbol, an algebra of tints to express certain other things. No colour he can use is in itself luminous, the resemblance it bears to light is only imagined by the spectator, in proportion as the artist presents us with contrasts, with sombre shadows or brooding clouds, and it is only by the aid of what he tries to represent that we can see his vision at all. But with the musician it is different—he deals with his materials direct; he takes sound pure, not a symbol of sound; his vision is woven of the waves of air which are eternal and original, not of chemical combinations of white lead, or the blood of cuttlefish. He mixes pure sound in his thought, and out of it ‘frames not a sound but a star.’ And Wagner, above all other musicians of all time, has taught an incredulous world what can be done with sound—his beautiful slave and master—just as Stephenson taught his faithless generation what could be done with steam. The emotions and passions of humanity are his harp; and his harp, touched by a master’s finger, tells us what it knows. Thus, in *Tannhäuser*, he has pre-

sented us with the great problem of all time—the war between the lower, the bestial side of man, and something which mankind itself has declared to be higher—the pure, steadfast soul. He tears the hearts out of the breasts of Galahad and Messalina, bleeding and palpitating ; he threads them together on his golden string, and then, the artist's work being over, he tosses them to us, and says 'Choose.' The materials for choice are all there, the whole of the data are before us, and as Tannhäuser chose once, so 'chance' has ordained that each of us should choose, and the same thing called 'chance' ordained that Reggie should choose that night.

There was a pause, a silence after the conductor had entered, and then the wooden instruments gave out half the problem. The slow, deep notes of the 'Pilgrim's March' rose and fell, walking steadfastly on in perilous place, weary yet undismayed. Then followed the strange chromatic passage of transition, without which even Wagner did not dare to show us the other side of the picture, and then the great animal, which had lain as if asleep, began to stir ; its heart beat with the life of its waking

moments, and it started up. The violins shivered and smiled and laughed as Venusberg came in sight; they rose and fell, as the march before had done, but rising higher and laughing more triumphantly with each fall—careless, heedless, infinitely beautiful. But below them, not less steadfast than before, moved the pilgrims. The riot was at its highest, the triumph of Venus and her train seemed complete, when suddenly Reggie started up. He stood at his full height a moment, watching the curtain rise on Venusberg.

‘I see, I see,’ he cried.

Then he turned to Eva.

‘You are a wicked woman,’ he said, and next moment the door of the box closed behind him.

Eva had been seated opposite him, and she had watched his face during the overture. Before he spoke, she knew what would happen, but she did not repent of her resolve. As he left the box, she made two hurried steps as if to follow him, and then stopped, turning round again towards the stage. The electric light fell full on her diamonds, on the gleam of her white dress, on her incomparable beauty. The fan that she had

held had slipped down and lay at her feet, and her hands were clenched together.

‘He is right,’ she said aloud. ‘Ah, my God! he is quite right.’

Jim Armine looked up as Reggie left the box, but as his chair was towards the stage he saw nothing except that he had gone. But when Eva rose, he turned half-round, and caught her words. It would not have required much penetration to see that something had happened, and it was not unnatural that he hesitated to ask Eva what was the matter. But the next moment she had picked up her fan, and had seated herself in her old place. She opened her mouth to speak once, and Jim waited, but she said nothing.

‘Where’s Reggie gone?’ asked he at length.

Eva summoned her wonderful power of self-control, and spoke in her natural voice.

‘I think he has gone home,’ she said with a certain finality. ‘Isn’t the scene charming? Really, they mount these things very well in England.’

The evening passed on; men from other boxes came and paid their respects to Lady Hayes, and, as usual, she snubbed some, was a little

amused by others, and appeared indifferent to all.

Towards the end of the third act, Lord Hayes made his appearance and made some true remarks on the state of the weather and the prevalent influenza. Eva listened to his remarks with somewhat unusual attention, and went so far as to inquire how his mother was, who, in spite of her fortified condition, was 'down' with the epidemic. But when the curtain fell for the last time, and Tannhäuser had died in 'the odour of sanctity,' she turned to Jim.

'I wonder if that ending is really natural,' she said. 'Do you think any man leaves Venusberg so utterly behind after he has been a *habitué* there? I wish Reggie had stopped. He would have given us some very spontaneous criticisms on the subject.'

'Do you think spontaneous criticisms are the most valuable?' he asked.

'Perhaps not; but they are very interesting. After all, experience may vitiate one's judgment as much as it matures it.'

'What a very odd doctrine,' laughed Jim. 'But

I don't suppose you really believe it yourself.'

'Oh no, probably I don't,' she replied, 'but I don't know what I do believe, and what I don't. Will you give me my cloak? Do you want a lift? No? Good-night!'

When Eva got home she went straight up to her room, and her husband followed her and sat down on a chair opposite to her, as if waiting for her to speak. But Eva had quite as successful a power of silence as he, and sat saying nothing, till he found it unbearable and, in a fatal fit of fidgeting, went across to the mantelpiece, where Reggie's photograph was standing. Eva's eyes followed him slowly, with a still impatience.

He took up the photograph and looked at it for a moment.

'Ah! this is your young friend Reggie Davenport, is it not?'

Eva yawned slightly and nodded assent.

'I thought he was at the opera with you to-night?'

'He was.'

'But surely he was not there when I came.'

‘No, he had gone away.’

‘Ah! I suppose he got tired of it. It is possible to get tired of Wagner.’

Eva stood up suddenly. Her self-control was beginning to break down, and the knowledge of what had happened, the entire success of her own scheme of letting Reggie know the truth about her, was being supplanted in her own mind by a great sense of loss. She felt reckless, at revolt with the world, intolerably intolerant of her position. As she stood there, watching her husband leaning on the back of a chair with the photograph of Reggie in his hands, the desire to fling the truth of it at him became too strong to resist.

She made a quick, silent step to his side, and plucked the photograph out of his hands.

‘I should not touch that again if I were you,’ she said, speaking in a low, rapid voice. ‘You had better leave it alone for the future. Oh! my meaning is clear enough. I am in love with Reggie Davenport. Yes—in love with him. He is not at all like a second Jim Armine, as you suggested the other day. No, this is quite a different thing. And he is in love with me, while he is engaged to that girl

whose photograph stood next his there. It is a sweet position, is it not? Here am I married to you—in love with a young man who is engaged to someone else who is in love with him, while he is in love with me. Ah! Hayes, I lost a great deal when I married you, while you got what you wanted. You wanted to be my owner, did you not? You wished to be master of my beauty. I know how beautiful I am; there is not another woman in London who can touch me. You wanted someone who would give that stamp to your dinner-parties and country house parties that I give it. You have had the best of it. And I married you because I wanted position, because I wanted to know the world. That I have got—I know it by heart. It is as dull as a week-old newspaper. Ah, God! how I know it. I did not know what it was to fall in love; I was inexperienced, ignorant. No, I don't blame you. I pity myself.'

Eva stopped for a moment, and put Reggie's photograph down on the mantelpiece again, next Gertrude's. She looked at them for a single second, and then took the girl's photograph, and, with a sudden, ungovernable frenzy, tore it to bits, and

threw the pieces in the grate. That wild-animal burst of jealousy would not be smothered. Then she went on, still speaking rapidly,—

‘You need not be afraid of scandal, Hayes, or anything else of that sort. I have broken with Reggie for good. He thought me kind and good, and all that is womanly, and so I wished him to know the truth about me. Have you ever been in love? If so, you will understand it. I shocked him horribly by explaining to him about Tannhäuser, and at the end of the overture, he suddenly understood what I meant, and he got up and left the box, having told me that I was a wicked woman. It was very fine. I admired him immensely for it. But that sort of thing is rather trying. I managed to behave decently while the play lasted, but I have broken down. That is all there is to tell you. I don’t really know why I told you at all.’

Lord Hayes listened to his wife with much composure.

‘Dear me, how very sensational!’ he said, ‘and how very Quixotic of you. I should not have thought you were capable of Quixotism. You are a most remarkable woman. I think I shall go to

bed. The new story by Paul Bourget which I am reading will seem quite flat after your little romance. Good-night !’

Eva felt a sudden sense that he was justified in his quiet scorn of her. How was it to be expected, she reasoned to herself, that he should behave to her, as far as in him lay, otherwise than she behaved to him? Her regret at all she had lost was not entirely resentment towards him. For the first time since she had known him, she was generous to him, showed a willingness to meet him half-way.

‘Wait a moment,’ she said, ‘I have not quite done.’

He paused in an uncompromising attitude with his hand on the handle of the door, ready for some fine return shot. But Eva’s impulse was strong within her, and she spoke.

‘I do not blame you,’ she said ; ‘I assure you of that. I only blame myself. You were willing to be very kind to me, and I believe you are willing still. In fact, I am very sorry for you, just as I am very sorry for myself. I do not wish to make it worse for either of us. I want to make a bad job as good as it can be made. I did not tell you what

I have told you, in order to disgust you or pain you. We are travellers in the same compartment in this very tiresome journey called life. We are inevitably shut in here until it is time for one of us to get out. Do not let us quarrel; it will only make the journey worse.'

Lord Hayes came a step closer.

'Do you find this journey called life so tiresome?' he asked. 'I should have thought you would have enjoyed it.'

'I wish I was dead,' said she, simply.

Then, quite suddenly, all her self-control gave way. She dropped her face in the sofa cushions and sobbed as if her heart would break. Lord Hayes was by no means a fool, and he saw very plainly what the reason for this sudden outburst was, and obviously it was not very complimentary to him, however complimentary it might be to another.

He closed the door quietly, and sat down in a chair a little way from her. He had no notion of being tender, and he lit a cigarette till she was herself again. The sobs grew quieter after a while, and in a few minutes Eva sat up again. Lord

Hayes chucked the end of his cigarette into the fireplace.

‘My dear Eva,’ he said very calmly and quietly, ‘I know quite well, of course, what this all means. You are in love with that young fellow, and that quite accounts for your very—your very extraordinary behaviour. But I don’t mind that at all, I assure you. You may be in love with him as much as ever you like. The only thing I should mind would be any scandal on the subject, and I feel quite sure that nothing of the sort will happen. You have been very candid to me—very candid indeed, and I will follow your lead. I know perfectly well that your position and title and wealth are much too dear to you to let you risk any possibility of losing them. You would lose everything by a scandal, and I do not believe you would gain anything. This young man is engaged to another girl, as you say, and he is obviously a very good young man, and will do nothing he should not. In any case, you would have to live at Boulogne or Dieppe, or some of those hideous little French towns, among a set of second-rate people. That is absurd on the face of it. No, I am sure this “tedious journey called life,” to quote

your own words again, would be much more tedious there. For the rest, I fail to see how I am to prevent our quarrelling. It never has been a wish of mine that we should. So once more, good-night !'

Eva was sitting up looking at her husband, with an intensity that was not pleasant to contemplate. He felt it perhaps, for once, when he met her eyes, he looked away again immediately and he faltered in his speech. The utter, entire absence of generosity of anything like manly feeling in what he said, seemed to Eva to be a new revelation of meanness, the like of which she had never encountered. He turned and left the room at these last words, and Eva was left sitting there.

CHAPTER VII

MRS DAVENPORT had spent the evening alone. Her husband was away for the night, and Reggie, as we have seen, had gone to the opera.

Whatever Reggie was, he was not secretive, and his obvious pleasure that afternoon at Lady Hayes's invitation did not savour of the sweetness of consciously forbidden fruit. But his very frankness, which, as has been mentioned before, was capable of dealing unpleasant back-hand blows, had also a dazzling power about it, which, like the rays from a noon-day sun, renders it impossible to tell what lies behind, though it would be very false to describe it as partaking of the nature of dissimulation. It seemed to say, 'I am not responsible for the weakness of your eyesight; I show my mystery or my want of

mystery to you with all my heart, and you are at fault if you cannot form any conclusion which it is.' To continue the metaphor, Mrs Davenport would have felt not ungrateful to some abatement in its brilliance partaking of the nature of an eclipsed frankness, a shadow cast on the disc by some external object, or, at any rate, she would have been glad to take the opinion of someone who was possessed of smoked glasses, or a natural tendency to observe correctly. Had she known it, Lord Hayes would have been exactly the individual required, but it was no discredit to her acuteness that the idea never entered her head, quite apart from the impracticability of putting it into execution.

She had just dined and was glancing through the pages of a novel from Mudie's, when the drawing-room door opened, and Reggie appeared. He paused a moment when he saw his mother, and then advanced into the room. His attempt to look unconcerned and contented was singularly unsuccessful.

Mrs Davenport laid down her book, frightened.

'Ah! Reggie, what's the matter? What has happened?

Reggie turned away from her, and fingered a small ornament on the mantelpiece.

‘Nothing,’ he said hoarsely. ‘I came away from the opera. I—’

He turned round again, and knelt by his mother’s chair.

‘Don’t ask me just now,’ he said. ‘There has been a scene, and I came away. Lady Hayes said things that disgusted me. I didn’t think she was like that.’

Mrs Davenport offered a short mental thanksgiving. Until the relief had come, she had not known how much Reggie’s intimacy with Lady Hayes had weighed on her. She waited for a moment to see if Reggie would say more. Then—

‘Won’t you tell me more, dear, or would you rather not?’

‘Yes, I want to tell you,’ said he. ‘At dinner she told me all about Tannhäuser and Venusberg, and I didn’t understand her. Then, when the overture was played, I suddenly understood it all. It was horrible; it was wicked. If anybody else had said that, I should simply have thought it was very bad form, but that she should!’

Mrs Davenport had not quite realised before how serious it was, and Reggie's tone, even in his renunciation of Eva, was a shock to her.

'That she should say those things,' repeated Reggie. 'But when I understood it, I couldn't stop there. I don't remember very clearly what happened. I told her she was a wicked woman, and then I came away.'

The excessive baldness of his narrative struck Mrs Davenport as convincing, and she felt a little reassured. But Reggie had not meant to reassure her, and he soon undeceived her.

'Why should she have said those things to me?' he went on, getting up, and walking about the room. 'Why, if she was like that, couldn't she have kept it from me? I should have been content to know only half of her, and to have adored that.'

'Ah!'

Mrs Davenport winced as with a sudden spasm of pain; then pity for Gertrude bred in her anger for Reggie. 'What do you mean?' she said sharply. 'I do not understand you in the least. You adored her, then; why not say love?'

'I didn't know it before,' said he, 'until this

thing came, or, of course, I should have gone away. I am not a villain. But I know it now; I adored her, and I loved her—and—'

'And you do still?'

'Yes.'

There was a long silence, and the hum of the London streets came in at the open window. Mrs Davenport found herself noticing tiny things, among others that Reggie had placed the ornament he had been fingering perilously near the edge of the mantelpiece. In a great crisis our large reflective and thinking powers get choked for a moment and the ordinary surface perceptions, which are as instinctive and unnoticed as breathing, are left in command of our mind. The sight of that ornament there assumed an overwhelming importance to her, and she got up from her seat and put it back in a safer place. Then she turned to Reggie, who was standing still in the middle of the room, with his back towards her.

'Sit down here, Reggie,' she said quietly. 'I think we had better talk a little. Do you quite realise what that means?'

'Ah, don't talk to me like that,' he burst out.

‘As if I was not in hell already, without being reminded of it. Mummy, I don’t mean that. You are all that is good and loving. You know that I know it. You are very gentle with me. I won’t be angry again.’

Mrs Davenport’s anxiety for Gertrude made her very tender.

‘Ah, my dear,’ she said, ‘I do not care for myself. It is very immaterial that you speak like that to me. I should be a very selfish woman if I thought of myself just now. There are others to think of, you and—and Gertrude.’

‘Yes, I know, I know. But what am I to do? Tell me that, and I will do it.’

‘Go to Aix,’ said his mother promptly, ‘and go at once.’

‘Go to Aix!’ said he. ‘Why, that’s just what I couldn’t possibly do. God knows, I have done Gertrude injury enough, without insulting her!’

‘Your waiting here in London is the worst insult you could do her. You must see that.’

‘I can’t do it!’ he cried. ‘You know I can’t. How can I leave Eva—Lady Hayes—like this?’

Mrs Davenport got up, and waited a moment

till her voice was more under her control. But when she spoke, her anger vibrated through it so strongly, that even Reggie, in his almost impenetrable self-centred wretchedness, was startled.

‘Has it ever occurred to you that there is another concerned in this besides yourself?’ she said. ‘Are you aware that Gertrude loves you in a way that it honours any man to be loved? Do you mean to make no effort to repair the injury you have done her? Be a man, Reggie; you have been a boy too long. Dare you say you ever loved Gerty, if you treat her like this—now? You wish to behave like a fool, and, what is worse, like a coward. I never thought I should be ashamed of you, as I shall be now, if you stop in London after what has happened.’

Once more there was a dead silence. Mrs Davenport, as she knew, had played her ace of trumps; she had brought to bear the strongest motive that she could think of to influence Reggie. If he would not listen to her because she was his mother, if he cared nothing about the effect his action would have on her opinion of him, she knew that there was no more to be done by her.

Reggie flushed suddenly, as if he had been struck.

‘But what good will it do if I go?’ he cried; ‘and where am I to go to? I can’t go to Gertrude now.’

‘Your place is with her,’ said Mrs Davenport. ‘If it is all over between you, it is your business to tell her. I don’t wish you to tell her at once, but go there and wait a week. Don’t be a coward, and don’t think that it will be any the better for putting it off. What do you propose to do in the interval—to wait here? She will write to you, and will you not answer, or will you pretend that you are hers, as she is yours? That would not be a very honourable position, would it? Don’t disgrace yourself and bring dishonour on us all. Have you no pride, even?’

Reggie looked up in amazement.

‘Disgrace myself—bring dishonour on you—’

‘Has it never struck you that you are on the verge of doing that?’ said Mrs Davenport.

It evidently had not, and Reggie received the possibility of it with deep perplexity. But the outcome was that he said wearily,—

‘Do as you like with me. Yes; I will go.’

‘Ah! but what is the use of going like that?’ said

his mother. 'You must go, not because I wish you to, but because you realise it, and mean to act up to it. The fact of your going is only a symbol that you are not quite disloyal yet. You are to go as if your heart was still whole; you are going to meet Gerty, to meet her to whom you promised so much. You told me Eva said things which disgusted you. Think of them; sting yourself into hating her. Oh! it will not be easy. I do not expect you will enjoy yourself.'

Reggie sat still a moment; then he exclaimed inconsequently,—

'I am very tired. I shall go to bed. Yes, I want to see Gerty again very much.'

Reggie, as he had said, had only that night realised how much Eva had entered into his life. It had not occurred to him before to put the case candidly to himself; not because he wished to shirk a conclusion, but because he regarded his feeling for Gertrude as sufficiently safe to warrant the assumption that things were all right. But when this sudden crash came—serious enough, at least, from his point of view, for he could not help regarding his words to Eva as a formal and complete

rupture—he saw exactly where he stood. He was separated from Eva; but he was separated from Gertrude, not by any violent wrench, but by the gradual drift of the current, which he had not perceived till now. It had not occurred to him to be honest with himself before. Eva had been divinely kind to him, sympathetic, eager to share his confidence; it was no wonder that, in the blank which Gertrude's absence made, he had found pleasure in giving it her, and that the aforesaid blank became gradually filled with new interests. If the thought ever had occurred to him that the image of Eva was becoming a sort of palimpsest to that of Gertrude, he would have denied the imputation stoutly, perhaps the more stoutly because he was aware that he had not been at pains to find out.

Mrs Davenport felt, when he had left her, that in a vague way she had expected all this. She had been quite aware that it is not possible for men to continue being boys indefinitely—that there is a time for everyone when they must ask themselves why they do a thing, or why they do not do it; and she knew that, for Reggie, that time had come.

He was a boy no longer; that unconscious youth, which had moved Eva's interest, then her love, had gone; he had awoke from his long, happy dream to the grey, convincing morning of reason and of claims. That he would be the better man for it, she did not doubt; that he could not have been a man without, she knew; and yet she was full of regret, full of those aching thoughts 'for days that are no more,' which are even more poignant when we feel them for others than when we mourn over them for ourselves. Reggie had consented to go away—that was good; but was there not something left to be done? She knew from him that he had called Eva 'a wicked woman,' and had left the box. What, then, was Eva's feeling on the subject? If she was offended, so much the better; she might be induced to say so. If—worst chance of all—she cared for him, more than she cared for the hundred men who were dangling round her, was there still no possibility of making her say she was offended? All the mother's pride and protectiveness revolted against the notion, but it was worth trying. Mrs Davenport had so clearly in her mind the best solution of the problem—namely, the dis-

enchantment of Reggie, by any means, or, failing that, the prolonged absence from Eva—that she put her pride in her pocket. She remembered perfectly well her talk with Percy; how he had felt uneasy at this engagement, because it resembled too much Reggie's previous escapades: and surely, if he was right, Reggie's very curtailed entanglement with Eva came under the same head. Let him only get away, with obvious discouragement from Eva, and let Gertrude reassert her previous relation, unconscious of any interruption.

Lady Hayes had not passed a very good night. She was on the verge of doing a very difficult thing; that is to say, doing something directly opposed to her inclinations. In fact, she was, as she had told her husband, in love with Reggie Davenport, and such an experience was new to her. But this very simple and every-day phenomenon was curiously complicated in her case. She happened to be another man's wife, and the man with whom she was in love was about to be another girl's husband. She thought with some impatience of the hundred-and-one stories which are called realistic because they are improbable, in which

the woman and man cast everything to the winds and say they obey the dictates of the divine mother of things, because that solution was very far from satisfying her. There is a book that says that love seeketh not its own, and, curiously enough, Eva found her thoughts straying to that short text, which has been abandoned as untrue by the apostles of evolution and modern life, who say that that particular gospel has served its time, that we now know a more excellent way. She had probably never devoted much thought as to whether she was modern or not, but she was surprised to find that so ancient a text seemed to represent her mood more clearly than less antique and hall-marked utterances.

She had had breakfast and was still sitting in the dining-room with her husband, when a footman came in bearing a card. Eva looked at it and pondered. Then,—

‘Tell Mrs Davenport I will see her ; show her in here.’

Eva got up from her place, and walked up and down the room. She was very pale, and she looked anxious and worn. But she stopped opposite the

flower-stand in the corner, and put two orchids in the front of her dress.

Mrs Davenport was announced, and remarked that it was a beautiful morning, and Lord Hayes assented. She had seldom seen him before, and he was dressed with extreme care, but appeared wholly insignificant. She remembered his enormous wealth, and it seemed to her to be a sort of label to prevent his getting quite lost in this large world. He reminded her of an undelivered parcel, waiting for its owner to turn up.

Lady Hayes sat silent for a few minutes, and then turned to her husband.

‘Perhaps you would be so good as to go away,’ she said in a low, musical voice, ‘as I have things to talk over with my friend, or, if you like, we will go upstairs. Perhaps that would be better.’

Lord Hayes got up with alacrity.

‘The fact is,’ he said, ‘I was on the point of going. I have some business to do. I was wanting to talk to you some time later on, if it would be convenient.’

‘Certainly,’ said Eva. ‘I will see you about it later.’

She dropped her eyes as he addressed her, and sat looking at the ground till he had left the room. Then she said to Mrs Davenport,—

‘What do you want with me?’

Her tone belied the curtness of her words, and she waited eagerly for the answer. These few moments after she had said she would see Mrs Davenport, were spent in an agony to control herself. She was hungering for more news from Reggie, but in her hand she held a note, which had come from him by the early post, which made her decision doubly difficult. It was a wild, absurd production, imploring pardon, entreating her to let him know that she had forgiven him—only half coherent—and Eva knew that he had really made his choice, or was willing to make his choice between her and Gertrude, if she would only say ‘Come.’ ‘I am going to Aix to-day,’ the note finished, ‘to see Gertrude. Cannot you send me one word, to say you forgive me? I behaved quite unpardonably.’

Mrs Davenport raised her eyes to Eva’s face, and answered her bravely.

'I have come to talk to you about Reggie,' she said.

Eva flushed, and unconsciously closed her hand on the note she held.

'What about him?'

'He is not very happy,' said Mrs Davenport, gently, 'and I think perhaps you can help me.'

'Ah! I think I probably can,' said Eva. 'I am glad you have come to see me. I am afraid I have made mischief, and I am sorry. It is odd for me to be sorry; I suppose it's a sign that I am growing old. You know for some time he has been seeing a good deal of me. That was my fault; I ought to have stopped it. And last night I gave him a sudden shock. He only knew one little bit of me, and I thought it was better—'

Eva stopped, for her voice was trembling, and Mrs Davenport waited.

'It was better,' she continued, after a moment, 'that he should know the rest of me. Then, when he knew, he called me a wicked woman, and went away straight from the opera. It was splendid. I admired him immensely. But it appears he is sorry he did so. I have just got a note from him imploring forgiveness.'

‘Ah! the foolish boy,’ said Mrs Davenport, half involuntarily.

‘Yes, I quite agree with you. You see it puts me in a difficulty. I like him very much—so much that I should be sorry to do him an injury. I should do him an injury if I allowed him to fall in love with me again. On the other hand, I like him well enough to be very sorry not to see him again, and I have to choose.’

Eva stopped again, and Mrs Davenport laid a hand on hers.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said eagerly.

Eva was gradually regaining her control over herself.

‘I want him to be very happy,’ she said, ‘and his best chance of happiness, I am sure, is with that girl; I forget her name. I have never seen her, but Reggie has spoken of her to me. He ought to go to Herefordshire, or wherever it is, and live among the daisies with his beloved. He is not made for this sort of thing; he is too good. I don’t at all wish to spoil his life or the girl’s life.’

Mrs Davenport bent forward again in her chair.

‘Ah! Eva, you will do it, won’t you? I am sure

you are right. He will be very happy with her. Do write to him, and say you are offended ; make him angry, touch his pride, be as brutal as possible.'

'But I don't feel brutal,' said Eva. 'It is rather hard on me. Oh! I can't, I can't!' she exclaimed suddenly.

Mrs Davenport saw how matters stood at once, and she paused. She had not expected this complication.

Eva started up as she made this self-betrayal, and stood with the colour rising in her cheeks, furiously angry with herself, and wondering how Mrs Davenport would interpret it. She blamed herself for ever having seen her ; she had passed a sleepless night and her nerves were disordered. But the other lady spoke again, almost at once. She saw that it made it harder for Eva, but she saw that the only thing to be done was to pretend to have noticed nothing. So, before the silence grew portentous, she went on, but with more tenderness in her voice,—

'Yes, of course it is hard for you,' she said. 'It is very hard to be unselfish in this weary world.

But it is worth an effort, is it not? And that you are fond of Reggie ought to make it easier. You don't wish to spoil his life, as you say.'

'How did he behave last night when he came home?' asked Eva, suddenly.

'He is changed,' said Mrs Davenport. I think you would see it. Somehow, he is a boy no longer; he has become a man, and he finds it not pleasant.'

'Ah! that is so, is it?' said Eva. 'It was horribly stupid of me. But it makes it easier for me. He was so young, somehow—which I have never been. Are you sure you are right?'

'Yes, quite sure.'

'That makes it easier for me, and perhaps for him. Does he take things hard?'

'I don't think Reggie has known anything before which he could take hard. He has been very happy.'

'You mean he will be less happy now.'

'For the time, yes,' said Mrs Davenport; 'but I feel sure it will be for the best. He is one of those people who are made to be happy, and I am sure he will have less unhappiness this way than if you took any other course.'

‘I must think about it,’ said Eva, turning and walking up and down the room. But even as she spoke she tore Reggie’s letter in half, and threw the pieces into the grate. ‘It is hard for me, is it not?’ said she, stopping in front of Mrs Davenport, ‘but it appears I am to be the victim.’

‘Reggie looked very like another victim last night,’ said the other.

Eva looked away.

‘Did he—was he very unhappy about it?’ she asked.

‘Not too unhappy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘From what I know of him,’ said Mrs Davenport, ‘especially since this sudden change has come, if you speak now, you may make the whole difference to him. Make him angry and sore, and then let him go off to Aix, and I think Gertrude will do the rest. I wonder if she will guess what has happened. I hope not.’

‘How she will hate me!’ murmured Eva, ‘and so will Reggie. It is really hard to see what I am to gain by the arrangement.’

‘Ah! don’t go back now,’ entreated Mrs Daven-

port. 'See, I have no pride left. I implore you to do what I ask. You are very powerful; I know your power too well, and so does Reggie, God help him!'

'I wonder if it is really better to be unselfish than selfish,' mused Eva, more to herself than to Mrs Davenport, 'or to try to do good at all. We are so very short-sighted that we may be doing the worst thing possible. Who were these very ingenious people who did harm when they wanted to, in order that good might follow? Anyhow, if I do this, I shall not have chosen the selfish course. I suppose there will be an imperishable reward for me somewhere. Even so, perhaps I am really doing the selfish thing by doing as you ask me; it all depends, doesn't it, on how much I like him? whether I like him enough to be unselfish; whether the burden of being selfish wouldn't be harder to bear than the burden of being unselfish.'

'I know how little I matter to you personally,' said Mrs Davenport, 'but you will know at least that I think you have done a very noble thing, something of which not many are capable; something it was very hard for you to do.'

‘Ah! you don’t understand me a bit,’ broke out Eva. ‘I assure you that no one’s opinion has an atom of weight with me. I fear evil report as little as I covet good. Let me think for a few moments.’

Mrs Davenport was silent; she hardly heard Eva’s last speech, for all her thoughts were on her possible decision. That she had not dismissed her at once, had not refused to see her, she felt was a favourable sign. Eva, she knew, was quite capable, in spite of a certain intimacy between them, of having sent a message that she saw no one in the morning. Mrs Davenport feared her and her cold, hard power, as she feared nothing else in the world. She sat there pale, almost trembling, while Eva passed slowly up and down the room, for a few minutes. But at the end of one of these turns, when she was by the door, she passed out, and Mrs Davenport heard her step ascending the stairs. She waited there while the minute hand crept round the dial of the great bronze clock on the mantelpiece, and it was half-an-hour before Eva appeared again, with a large, unsealed envelope in her hand. She looked very weary, but as faultlessly beautiful as ever.

‘I have not sealed it,’ she said, ‘because I thought you might like to read it, and while I am about it I might as well do it handsomely. At the same time, I would sooner you did not read it, but I shall neither blame you nor try to dissuade you if you wish to. With it is Reggie’s photo—the one he gave me. You need not take them. Will you read it? No? Then I will send a man with it at once, as you don’t care to look at the letter. There is no reason why you should be turned into a penny post because your son has called me a wicked woman. He was quite right, by the way—perfectly right. I—’

Eva stopped suddenly, for there was that tremor in her voice which had been there once before at this interview.

‘I will not betray myself,’ she determined, biting her lip, in a splendid effort to keep command over herself.

‘There is just one thing that I should like to ask you,’ she went on almost at once; ‘send me a line now and then, to tell me about Reggie, and whether it is all right between him and the girl. I liked him very much, you know, and I shall never see him again, I suppose.’

Mrs Davenport was much moved. She had guessed, and guessed correctly, that Reggie would not be the only sufferer, and that Eva had behaved heroically, and tears partly of relief, but partly of gratitude and admiration, started to her eyes.

‘God bless you for what you have done!’ she whispered. ‘I can say no more than that.’

The tension broke.

‘Leave me quickly,’ cried Eva, as the large, painful sobs began to break from her throat. ‘Go at once!’

‘Eva, Eva,’ cried Mrs Davenport, stretching out her hands to her.

‘Go—go at once!’ cried the other.

She turned rapidly from her, and Mrs Davenport, without another word, left the room. She just saw Eva sink in the arm-chair she had been occupying before, and bury her face in her hands. Mrs Davenport closed the door quietly and went out.

She had left behind her, and she knew it, a sorrow greater and more desolate than Reggie’s weaker nature would ever know. She remembered Percy’s prediction, that some day Eva ‘would do something sublimely unselfish, and that would be when she fell in love’

It was still only about mid-day when she left the house, and she had purposely said 'Good-bye' to Reggie before she went, for, presupposing the success of her expedition, of which Reggie knew nothing, her presence was unnecessary and undesirable. If, on the other hand, she was unsuccessful, she had determined to go to the station and meet her husband, and acquaint him with the state of things. She drove about for an hour or so, and then changed her mind, and determined to make an effort to see Reggie before he set off.

She arrived home just as he was starting, and they met in the hall, and when she saw his face she drew a deep breath of satisfaction and relief. He was unmistakably angry.

'You are just off, are you, dear?' she said quietly. 'Give Gertrude my love, and—and be very brave and make an effort, dear boy. It will not be easy God bless you, my darling!'

'She wrote to me this morning,' whispered Reggie hoarsely, as he kissed his mother. 'I will never speak to her or think of her again. Ah! Mummy, good-bye! you have saved me.'

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER Mrs Davenport had left her, Eva remained in the dining-room for an hour or more. She had chosen, and the choice was not easy. But it seemed to her as if the struggle came afterwards rather than before. The letter she had written to Reggie rose before her, and her heart cried to her for mercy. But the clear knowledge which she had arrived at, that his chance of happiness grew in direct relation to remoteness from herself, remained unclouded, and at no moment of that hour's agony would she have reconsidered her decision. That she had so decided was a matter of wonder to her, for it is always a surprise to find that we are better, not worse, than we think ; but her investment in unselfishness gave her no quick returns, for at present, as she well knew, Reggie was as miserable as she was. The sacrifice

of two victims called down no immediate answer from the blessed gods in the way of a sudden cessation of pain.

But when that hour was passed, she went upstairs to her husband, to see him about the business he had mentioned. She felt strongly the necessity of being active, of doing something, no matter what, which might possibly take her a little out of herself. Our moral nature has to go to bed when it is hurt, and it is well to leave it there, and not fidget at the bandages to see how it is getting on.

The business resolved itself into affairs connected with the ironworks at Trelso, and Lord Hayes told her that he was going down that afternoon, and would stop the night there, returning the following day. And Eva, longing for distraction, found none there. Her mother and Percy were in town, and she drove off, and fetched them back to lunch.

The sight of so well-appointed a house, and the thought that, in a measure, it was part of her environment, as being the mother of its mistress, always put Mrs Grampound in an excellent humour, at times bordering on a sort of mature playfulness.

‘And how is my little daughter behaving?’ she asked Lord Hayes, as soon as they were seated at lunch. ‘I hope she is doing me credit, and you too, of course. I don’t like the way girls behave now. I’m sure they do things we should have got dreadfully abused for when we were young, and now no one takes any notice whatever. Dear Eva, what a lovely piece in the middle of the table. That is new, is it not?’

‘The beauty of it is that it’s very old,’ remarked Eva.

‘Really, it looks so bright and fresh. And talking of brightness and freshness, I met Mr Davenport the other day. He spoke of you a great deal, as if he knew you quite well.’

‘He is a great friend of Eva’s,’ said her husband, watching her. ‘Why hasn’t he come to see you to-day, Eva?’

‘Chiefly because he left by the mail for Aix this morning,’ said Eva. ‘He asked me to say good-bye to you for him.’

Lord Hayes had the satisfaction of believing this to be untrue, but that was small compared with the complete failure on his part to ruffle Eva’s

bosom with an uneven breath, or raise the slightest tinge of colour to her face.

‘I’m quite in love with him,’ she went on slowly, without looking at her husband. ‘I feel quite desolate without him. Hayes, you must be particularly kind to me all day. Though, of course, you mustn’t hope to compete with Reggie in my affections.’

Lord Hayes smiled, and took some jelly. Most people know that particular moment experienced at varying distances from Dover pier, when they are not quite sure whether they enjoy the motion or not. Lord Hayes was, metaphorically speaking, being a little tossed about, and if he did not yet think with longing of *terra firma*, he was not sorry to remember that he would be alone at Trelso that evening.

‘What a beautiful thing it is, is it not,’ he said, addressing Mrs Grampound, ‘when a wife reposes such confidence in her husband, that she tells him she is in love with someone else? Truly there can be no secrets between such.’

Mrs Grampound tittered shrilly. To state the truth, as Eva had done, is often the surest, some-

times the only, way of producing a complete misconception. She failed to notice the acidity in Lord Hayes's face and voice, and thought the scene quite too charming. But Percy noticed and wondered.

'What shocking things to say to each other,' cried she. 'Eva, you naughty child, how can you? And you deserve I should scold you too,' she said, turning to her son-in-law.

'Reggie has scorned me and my homage altogether,' continued Eva gravely, speaking chiefly in order to produce a sort of counter-irritant to her own pain, on the same principle as that on which children, suffering from toothache, may be observed to bite their lips. 'He has gone off to Aix to see his *fiancée*. He gave me her photograph—wasn't that a cruel thing to do?—and his own. Really, it was most shameless. I was never so humiliated before. I think, when Hayes goes away to Trelso, I shall take the train to Aix and sit watching the hotel windows, and serenade him in the hotel garden. It's quite a new idea for a woman to serenade her lover. Why did you never serenade me, Hayes? I should like to see you

serenade on a cold night under a silk umbrella. Can you sing, by the way? You'd have to leave a good deal to the lute, like the man in Browning who serenaded at a villa during a thunderstorm. Your mother wouldn't approve of serenading, would she? The evening fever sets in about that time, I think, from eleven till two—of course, the damp wouldn't matter if you had Jaeger boots with eight holes in them.'

'Eva, you naughty girl!' said her mother again.

Yes; there was just a little too much motion. Metaphorically speaking, Lord Hayes went below.

'I've got to go to Trelso this afternoon,' he said. 'I hear that the men are getting more and more discontented. There is an organised body of Socialists down there, who incite them and refer to me as a brutal tyrant. What a very odd way to spend your life, you know—going about the country calling us names. I can't think what they imagine they will get by it.'

'It is rather hard to call you a brutal tyrant,' said Eva with some amusement. 'Now, if they had said so of Reggie, or of me, for example— Yes, Percy, you may smoke here, or let's go up to the

top of the porch. There is a tent there, and it is deliciously cool.'

The two gentlemen stayed behind a moment, and Eva and her mother went on. Lunch made Mrs Grampound even more effusive than usual.

'I do so love to think of you here in your beautiful house, darling,' she said to Eva, as they passed up the great marble stairs; 'with your husband devoted to you, and all that. A charming little scene at lunch, so playful and delicately touched. But you always were clever, dear. It is such a happiness to me to think of you like this. That yellow collar you have on your liveries is very becoming. How much do you pay your *chef*? Ah, what a charming little room this tent makes! I suppose you and your husband often sit here.'

She subsided into a low chair, and looked at Eva affectionately, or, at any rate, with an air of proud proprietorship.

'I am very rich,' murmured Eva. 'I have every thing that money can buy—I have a title—yes, what more can I want?'

Mentally she was far away. The boat got into

Calais about two-thirty. She had looked it out in a Bradshaw that morning. He had just left Calais, going south to join Gertrude. He would be at Aix next morning early. She felt, if she could only know exactly what effect her letter had had on him, she would be more content. Her heart ached for the sight of him, ached with the pang of that self-inflicted wound which had sent him away irrevocably, she hoped, or feared—which was it? There was half-an-hour at Calais, she remembered, on her journeys to Algiers; enough to lunch in, to buy a book in, to be rather bored in. There was—ah! the curtain that separated the little tent from the drawing-room was drawn aside, as she had often seen it drawn aside lately, when she said she was not at home to visitors—and Lord Hayes entered.

‘I have come to say good-bye,’ he said, ‘I must be leaving at once for the station. I shall be back to-morrow, Eva, soon after lunch, I expect; we are dining with the Davenports.’

‘Ah, yes, I had forgotten,’ said she. ‘Good-bye! I shall see you to-morrow.’

‘What are you going to do this afternoon?’

inquired her mother, after she had kissed her hand to Lord Hayes as he drove off.

‘I am going to Wimbledon House. There is a garden-party. It is a bore, but I promised to go.’ Eva paused to see the sudden alacrity with which she knew her mother would receive the news, before she added—‘Perhaps you would like to come with me.’

‘I should enjoy it very much,’ said her mother. ‘I am so fond of garden-parties, and they do them so well there.’

‘I didn’t know that you knew the Duchess,’ remarked Eva, and let the subject drop.’

She returned home and dined alone, and spent a long evening upstairs in her room. She reviewed again minutely from the beginning, not because she wanted to think of it, but because she could not avoid it, the events of the last weeks. It was as if a sudden light had burst in upon her soul, showing her what was meant by love, and then, just as she comprehended it, the exigencies of its very nature, the compulsion she was under to reveal herself, and that second compulsion which would not allow her to do for Reggie anything

but what her sober reason told her was best for him, had left her face to face with this horrible blankness. A spring had broken out which could never, she felt, cease to flow, but she stood there, with mouth gagged, unable to drink of its coolness. In her heart she believed that, even now, if she wrote one word to him—‘Come’—in two days he would be with her. But her longing and her firm renunciation seemed indivisible. She could no more have apostatised on her renunciation than she could have compelled herself to be quit of her love. Her nature was of too large and serene a type for her to feel again that one outburst of jealousy when she had torn Gertrude’s photograph in half. At that moment all the worst side of her heart had leapt out—the tigress element; the animal within her had raised that one howl of anguish, but after that it had lain still, cowed to the deeper pain of that in her which was human and divine. At the moment of her renunciation a light had shone on her darkness, and though the darkness comprehended it not, it wondered and was still; and when in that light she saw and decided what course she must, for all

reasons, take, the animal did not venture even to lift its head and growl.

Reader, are you burning to tell me that all this suffering on the part of Eva and Reggie — even if you allow that such a very proper chastening for the lax self-indulgence with which they slid into the mutual positions they now occupy is a subject fit to be treated of at all in a moral and Christian country, or whether you hold that I might as well describe the infliction of the cat-o'-nine-tails on a righteously - condemned convict for some well - defined and properly - chastened offence — that this suffering was perfectly well merited; that, had Eva been a woman of even decent moral principles, or had Reggie not been subject to the calviest of calf loves, it would never have happened; that, above all, it was their, particularly her, fault? I plead guilty to all these indictments, or rather I put in no defence for my prisoners, which is the same thing. I admit that Eva was not — according to the best lights, which you, no doubt, are judging her by — a woman of decent moral principles; that it is a tenable view that this infatuation of Reggie's was only a calf love;

but his last, remember, for I have told you that he was a boy no longer ; and, above all, I admit that it was their, particularly her, fault.

Now, with regard to Eva's morals, you are judging her, I imagine, by your own standards, which, after all, are the only standards by which one man can judge another. No one can judge by other men's standards, whether they be lower than their own or higher—the result is a loss of moral perspective. You cannot take observations, except by applying your eye straight to the telescope ; if you stand above it and squint, you will obtain an incorrect idea of what you wish to see. And in addition to venturing to assume that you judge her by your own standards, I will go further and assume, broadly, what those standards are. I have noticed that when people—as I, for the sake of argument, have made you do—refer to moral principles, they refer to a code which may vary in magnitude and comprehensiveness, but which is based on one principle—the avoidance, even in thought, of certain things which they regard instinctively, almost hysterically, as being impossible, because they are wrong. But the moral principles very seldom go so far as to say they are

wrong; they stop short at impossible—they are contrary to its nature—and that is enough. Eva, I am afraid, had no morals at all of this kind. To take an exaggerated instance, I am afraid, if the truth were known, vitally and essentially, she kept her hands from picking and stealing, not because it was wrong, but because she did not want the things she might have stolen. It is a very shocking confession, and it is driving a principle home to admit it, but it serves to illustrate under a distorting, or, at anyrate, a very high-power lens, the difference between her and you. But—and this, I again assume, is the purport of the whole matter in your mind—it was her own fault. Ah, if I could only tell you how freely I grant you that. And what is there, in Heaven's name, of all the sufferings we ordinary people undergo, that is not our fault? From the slippers which the labourer's wife has omitted to put down to warm for her lord, and which give rise to recriminations and perhaps a few silent tears, to the pangs of remorse for some wrong done which we can never undo, what is there of which we are wholly guiltless? The supremely-suffering-babe-

unborn-innocent-utterly-milk-and-water heroine of the severely classic romance is not common in this dingy, work-a-day world. It would be presumptuous in me to say she does not exist, but I have never seen her yet. She is a very beautiful and ennobling conception, and she always gets a full reward in the last chapter, where she is joined to her only love and lives happily ever afterwards, and sometimes is seen again in the epilogue, surrounded by a group of golden-haired, clean-limbed children, with their father's pensive eyes, who utter sentiments which must fill her maternal heart with pride and joy ineffable. But have you never, even in those beautiful epilogues, been faced by a grey, shadowy doubt that life is not quite like this, that even villains have good points, and heroines bad ones; that virtue does not always bring so full a reward, and that vice is not discomfited with that sublime completeness; in a word, that human nature is much more complex, more subtly compounded than the epilogue would indicate, that a nature capable of a sublime action is also capable of one or of many that do not fall in with your moral principles, and that something is to be said even

for the villain? But Eva, I maintain, though not a heroine, and though the bank of ineffable joy had not given her a blank cheque to be filled up at her pleasure, was not a villain. She had done something which no right-minded person would approve in allowing herself to fall in love with Reggie, and in allowing him to fall in love with her; and what is more, she had done something short-sighted. Not knowing the nature of love, she had tried to play with that perplexing emotion, and was finding now that it was not merely playing with her, but ordering her about in a most autocratic manner. She had committed a folly, and in this world we pay more heavily for a folly than a sin. She was bewildered, unstrung, unhappy, by her own fault, no doubt; but if we never pity those on whom justice makes its pitiless claims, whom shall we pity? Are we to class her with the villain, since we cannot class her with the heroine? After all, do not most of us belong to a class which it would be unjust or impossible to class with either the one or the other? There are more gradations between the noon-day sun and the starless night than the epilogues allow for. At any rate, all you

Rhadamanthine judges, she was paying for it, and surely that is all you demand. Come a little further with me; your desire for justice, justice for the uttermost farthing, will not be disappointed.

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Eva woke next morning from that dreamless sleep which only quickens our capabilities for suffering, woke with a start of pain into the full consciousness of her unimaginable future. But the absence of her husband was at least a mitigation; she felt she could not stand any extra burden just then. But would this horrible emptiness never cease—would there come no assuaging of her agony? It is hard, directly after some severe shock has been sustained, to believe in the possibly healing powers of time—all we feel is, that the impossible to-morrows and to-morrows will stretch away until death, and none will be less impossible than the last. And when one is young, strong, serenely healthy, that is a serious thought. Surely Eva was paying for her folly. And still she never reconsidered her decision; she still saw with undoubted clearness that Reggie, leaving herself out of the question, would eventually be happier with

Gertrude ; that, for him, there were pleasant places open on this weary earth, into which he would, in all probability, soon pass and leave her for ever. His best chance of happiness lay there, and herself she did leave out of the question utterly and fearlessly. There is something to pity, and perhaps, after all, there is something to praise.

There is nothing so unbearable as this consciousness of force that cannot be converted into effort, or reach fruition. It strikes with an unavailing hand at the gateways of our soul, but it cannot pass out and fulfil itself. And to Eva the sensation was wholly new. The coldest, least human of our species are just those who throw themselves with the most irresistible singleness into the force which has thawed them, when that unthawing comes. When their long winter is passed, the sap streams more fully into its channels, than in those who live, as it were, in most temperate climates, where the sap never wholly quits the trees. And Eva had none on whom to spend the force of her late waking love. The one who woke it was gone—gone by her own will—and the stream had no other outlet.

The hours passed wearily on till noon. After lunch she had calls to make, and about five o'clock she returned home to dress for a ride. Lord Hayes had not yet come back, and she left word that she would be in before seven. But the exercise, the sun, the meeting of half a hundred people she knew, had its due effect, and made the horror of that empty house the greater. To her it was a house full of ghosts, of dead possibilities and living horrors, and it was not till much before eight that she dismounted again at her door. The gloaming was rapidly deepening into night, the lamps had already been lit, and the white star on her horse's forehead glimmered strangely through the dusk. She asked the man whether Lord Hayes had returned, and learned that he had come back soon after she had gone out. They were to dine at the Davenports' at a quarter to nine, and Eva went straight to her room to dress. Lord Hayes, the man said, had already dressed and was sitting in his room, writing. He had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. Eva had two minds as to whether she should go to the Davenports that night or not, but the desire to see Mrs Davenport, to learn whether Reggie had

really gone, and how he had received her note, were too strong. She would be wiser, she knew, to say nothing about him, but the craving of her nature took no account of wisdom.

Half an hour later, she came out from her room, dressed for the party, faultlessly beautiful. She had put on the diamonds she had worn two nights ago at the opera, and they lay on her breast like a living embodiment of light. Just as she came out on to the landing, a man came upstairs to say the carriage was round, and she turned aside to go to her husband's room to tell him.

She opened the door, and, to her surprise, found the room was dark. Then she called him, but got no answer. The man who had announced the carriage was still standing on the landing, and she turned to him.

‘Where is Lord Hayes?’

‘His Lordship went into the room an hour ago, my lady,’ he said. ‘I have not seen him come out. He is not in his dressing-room.’

Eva stood for a moment with her hand still grasping the door, for the space in which a new thought may strike the mind. Her eyebrows con-

tracted, and the diamonds on her breast were suddenly stirred by a quick-drawn breath.

‘There is no light in there,’ she said. ‘Bring me a lamp quickly.’

She waited in the same position while the man fetched a lamp.

‘Take it in there,’ she said; ‘no, give it me.’

The man followed her in.

By the writing-table, with his face fallen forward on the paper, sat her husband. His arms sprawled on each side, and every joint was relaxed. Eva looked at him for a moment, and then touched him.

‘Hayes!’

There was no answer.

‘Hayes, Hayes!’ she said, raising her voice.

She set the lamp down on the table, close to the thing that sprawled there, and, taking him round the shoulders, dragged him up off the table. But the head fell back over one shoulder, and the two hands rattled against the wood-work of the chair, as his arms slipped off his knees.

‘Quick, quick!’ she cried to the man. ‘What are you standing there for? Don’t you see he is

ill? Let the carriage go off to the doctor's and bring him back. You fool, run! Send a man here at once!

Eva ran to the bell and rang it furiously. There was a sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs, and two men came running up.

'Lord Hayes is ill,' said Eva. 'Take him to his room, and lay him on the bed.'

She could not bear to stop in the room to see that nerveless thing being moved, and went out to the passage, where her maid met her. The atmosphere of terror had spread through the whole house, and servants were running up.

'Oh! my lady, what is the matter—is he dead?' asked that somewhat hysterical young woman, clasping her hands.

Eva turned fiercely on her.

'Nothing is the matter. What do you mean by saying that? Run downstairs and get some brandy. Quick! do you hear?'

The two men passed out close to Eva with their grim burden. She shuddered as they moved slowly along to the bedroom door. Then, after a moment, she followed them. They had laid him on the

bed, but, even in that attitude, the limpness was not that of a living man.

‘Leave me, wait till the doctor comes, and bring him up,’ said she.

When she was alone, she lit the candles and brought them near his face. She took up one of the open hands, and felt for the pulse, but found it not. Then, looking up suddenly, she saw her own face in the glass, set in a half circle of light from the diamonds on her neck. For a long moment she gazed, and then, setting the candles down, she unclasped the necklace, and dashed it on to the ground.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

MRS CARSTON was a widow, with only one daughter. She was a woman to whom querulousness had, by habit, become a second nature, but she had, as she often remarked, cause enough for complaint. Her husband, of whom she had been very fond, died suddenly, leaving her with one girl, a younger son, and less income than she could comfortably manage on. Then, two months later, her son died, leaving her alone with Gertrude. Her health, never very good, was much weakened by the double shock, and of late years she had become a *habituée* at Aix for four or five weeks every May, when there were plenty of English people there, with whom she used to talk gossip, and bemoan her unfortunate health.

Gertrude managed to be very happy during the earlier part of that month. The enchanted valley,

in which there falls not hail nor rain nor any snow, had a great charm for her, and she used to avail herself of the early morning hours, when her mother was undergoing her baths and douches and treatment, to wander far among the thick, dewy meadows, over which the mountains keep watch. She would pick great bunches of the early gentians and meadow sweet, and tall, tasselled grasses, and make their sitting-room bright with their wild, free beauty. The flowers sold in the market-place had less attraction for her; they reminded her of towns, and she found it sweeter in the country. She had, too, at first, a very happy background to this pure joy of living, in the thought of Reggie. Ever since the winter, her love for him had been undergoing a slow, steady change; it had deepened and widened imperceptibly from day to day, and, looking back on the early days of their courting, the hours now seemed to her to have been unmomentous and shallow, save that they held the germ which had ripened into this. And he was going to join them, as he had said, in a few weeks, and she felt she particularly wished to be with him again, in the way that she would be at Lucerne—away from his

world and her world. Those quiet hours had for her in anticipation a glorious possibility. She would make Reggie feel all that he was to her, make him understand the new depths which she knew had been opened by her love in her nature.

She did not usually see her mother till the twelve o'clock *déjeuner*, and one morning, about five days after their arrival, she had got up earlier than usual and walked down to the lake. The day before, Reggie's letter, announcing Lady Hayes's sudden desire to have her photograph, had arrived, and for an hour or two she had been filled with perplexing doubts, of which she felt ashamed. But her true and deep loyalty had soon reasserted itself, and she had chased them from her mind. She told herself that she was absolutely unjustified in ever letting the vaguest uneasiness rise into her thoughts. Whatever her feeling was, it had sprung from that irrational pique with which she had received Reggie's remarks concerning Eva six months ago. She had then conceived in her mind a dislike and distrust for a woman she had never seen, and that weed she had allowed to grow until, just before she left London, she had refused to go to

lunch with her for no reason at all. Decidedly it was time to pull the weed up.

So she went out next morning feeling a wider happiness than ever. That act of loyalty was finding a full reward, and the meadows had never looked so green, nor the waters so lovely, nor the background of her thoughts so satisfying. The post had not come in when she left the hotel, and the certainty of a letter from Reggie awaiting her return added its solid contribution to her happiness.

The tall, graceful figure, walking swiftly along the poplar avenue out of the town, was very characteristically English. Several French women, as she passed through the streets, turned to look at her, wondering who was that English demoiselle, who walked so fast; why she was at Aix at all, and, above all, for what conceivable reason she should want to walk. But none of them failed to smile pleasantly when Gertrude gave them a '*bon jour*;' her face was so irresistibly happy and handsome, and they went back to their work smiling, and forgetting for the moment to scold Jean or Pierre for putting their dirty little fingers in the washtub.

Gertrude got down to the lake while the sun was still behind the big range of hills to the east, though, looking back, she could see the tops of the mountains behind, and even the lower pastures beneath them touched by the new gold. She sat down on the landing-stage and watched the glory spreading downwards, till it reached the clear, white town she had left, and finally the sun itself swung into sight over the serrated outline of the eastern hills. The small, blue ripples tapped an invitation on the sides of the pleasure boats lying at anchor, and Gertrude determined to have a short row before going back. The boat-keeper expressed astonishment and dismay when he heard that *mademoiselle* proposed to row herself, but Gertrude stripped off the light jacket she was wearing, and told him to get two light sculls, and, with a laugh, disdaining his outstretched hand, she jumped into the boat and pushed off.

Life was very sweet that morning. She was going to write to Reggie and tell him to come very soon, before they left Aix, for it was a nice place, and he could row as much as he liked, and go for long walks, and there were horses to be had.

As she paddled quietly along, she pictured herself here again with him in a week or two. He would be sure to come. Had he not said he did not care for London, and he did happen to care for her? She wanted her mother to know him too, for she had only seen him at present on fugitive visits, and her 'ideas' about him were vaguer than Gertrude wished.

The sun was already high when she landed again, but the dusty mile of road up to Aix was short in her anticipations. There would be a letter for her from someone she cared about, infinitely dear to her, but, as the advertisements often say, 'of no value but to the owner.' So she walked up not feeling the sun, only conscious of an inward glow of happiness which nothing could touch.

Yes—the post had come in, and the polite porter looked through the letters. 'Miss Carston? No; none had come this morning.' Was he quite sure? 'Yes; but perhaps mademoiselle would like to look through them for herself?' Mademoiselle did like to do so, and she went upstairs to see her mother, feeling that the doubts, which she had

buried the day before, had celebrated a private resurrection on their own account.

‘Summer had stopped.’ There are no words for it but those. Was the sky still as blue? Possibly, but not for her. And when the sky is not blue for us, it is noticeable that we do not care very much, even the most unselfish of us, whether it is blue for others or not.

Gertrude, in fact, passed on the stairs a colonial bishop and his wife, whom she had been accustomed to make the sharers of her intense joy in its blue spring; but when the lady recorded her opinion that it was a lovely day, Gertrude felt that the remark was singularly ill-chosen.

She found her mother upstairs, preparing to come down. It was one of her bad days, and Gertrude knew that even greater attention than usual would be required of her.

‘I have been wanting you ever so long—these two hours at least,’ said her mother, as she entered. ‘I wish you could manage to think about me sometimes. But that is always the way. Invalids never matter. They can look after themselves.’

Gertrude kissed her mother and took off her hat.

‘I am so sorry,’ she said, ‘I went a longer walk than usual, right down to the lake, and had a short row. Did you have your massage earlier this morning? You are not usually ready till twelve, and it is not twelve yet.’

‘No, I had it at ten, as usual. Why should I have it earlier?’

‘I thought you said you had been waiting for me so long. However, here I am now. I won’t be out so late another morning. What did you want me to do?’

‘Mrs Rivière met me at the bath,’ said her mother, ‘and wanted me to go for a picnic this afternoon, and you. I think I shall go. I want a breath of fresh air; they are going up to the Monastery, on the far side of the lake. We shall have to dress up, I suppose. Princess Villari is going, and the Prince too, I think.’

Gertrude frowned slightly. She detested Mrs Rivière with all the power with which a healthy, honest mind can detest *mondaines* of a certain description.

‘Did you say we would come?’ she asked.

‘Why, of course I did. I suppose you don’t want to go now. Really, considering what I have to go through, it might be expected that my only daughter would not object to coming with me for a picnic, where perhaps I may get a little distraction. And the doctor particularly told me to get up in the hills now and then.’

‘Mother, why do you judge me so hastily?’ said Gertrude. ‘Of course I will come; I only asked you whether you had accepted. What time shall we start? It will be delicious up there. Must I put on my very best frock?’

‘Gracious me, yes,’ said Mrs Carston. ‘I wish you had a better. And you’re getting dreadfully brown. Gertrude, I wish you would take a little more care of your complexion. You won’t be fit to be seen in a low dress when we get back to England. Ah, there’s the bell. Give me your arm, dear, I am a mass of aches to-day. Have you heard from Reggie this morning?’

‘No, there were no letters for me to-day,’ said Gertrude, cheerfully. ‘I shall have to blow Reggie up when I write again. Or shall I not write until he writes to me?’

‘I forget whether you know Princess Villari,’ asked her mother. ‘You’ve seen the Prince, haven’t you?’

‘I never spoke to her,’ said Gertrude. ‘But I saw her last night at the Cercle; she was going into the baccarat-room, talking at the top of her voice, and smoking.’

‘It’s becoming quite the thing to smoke,’ remarked Mrs Carston. ‘I should smoke, if I were you, this afternoon, if everybody else does. It is no use making an obvious exception of oneself. It looks so odd.’

‘Oh! I think it’s horrid for women to smoke,’ said Gertrude. ‘It’s unfeminine. Don’t you think it is?’

‘Nonsense; I wish you would, if others do,’ said her mother; ‘but you are always so determined. If you don’t wish to do a thing, you won’t do it. Take me to that seat at the small table. I can’t talk to Mrs Mumford any more.’

The rest of the party were all coming from the ‘Splendide,’ the great hotel at the top of the hill overlooking Aix, and as the road from there went by the Beau Site, where Gertrude and her mother

were staying, it had been arranged that the party from the upper hotel should call for them as they passed, and pick them up. Mrs Carston told Gertrude that they were going to drive down to the lake in the Prince's four-in-hand, take boats there, and walk up to the Monastery, where they would have tea.

Gertrude and her mother were sitting in the verandah, facing the road, after lunch, when the brake drew up at the entrance to the hotel. A woman, brilliantly beautiful and marvellously dressed, was driving, whom Gertrude recognised as the Princess. She was smoking a cigarette, and held her whip and reins in the most professional manner. By her side sat Mrs Rivière, and, in the centre of the seat just behind, a handsome, foreign-looking man, who, when they stopped, and he saw Gertrude and her mother coming down the steps, leaned forward to the Princess, and said,—

‘Who is that very handsome girl there, Mimi? Is she coming with us?’

The Princess turned to look, and gave a shrill, voluble greeting to Mrs Carston.

‘Charmed to see you! Get up and sit next my

husband. Villari, you know Mrs Carston, don't you? And is that your daughter with you? I am so glad you were able to come, too. Steady, you brutes! Bring the steps, quick! These animals won't stand quiet. Villari, get down and help them up.'

'It's Miss Carston,' she said to him, as he passed her; 'isn't she handsome? Very *ingénue*, I imagine. Do you know her, Mrs Rivière?'

'I met her the other day,' she replied. 'I don't think they've been here very long. How beautifully you drive!'

'That's one of my English accomplishments,' said the Princess; 'and I haven't forgotten it, you see. Dear me! it's more than a year since I've been to England. We're going in November. Villari's bought a country place there, you know. Are you right behind there? Go on, you brutes, then! Ah! you would, would you?'

The Princess gave a savage cut with her whip at one of the leaders, who appeared to want to go home, and they started off at a hand-gallop.

'For God's sake, take care, Mimi!' said the Prince, leaning forward, as they swung round a corner with

about three-quarters of an inch to spare ; ' the streets will be full to-day—it's Saturday.'

' Blow the horn, old boy !' remarked the Princess. ' Tell them we're coming. I must go fast through here, you know, because I've got the reputation of driving like the son of Nimshi. Do you know who the son of Nimshi was, Mrs Rivière? He comes in the Bible.'

By about an equal mixture of the favour of Providence and the dexterity of the Princess, they got through the town in safety, without impairing the reputation of the latter as being a furious driver, and the horses settled down to a steady pace on the road to the lake.

The Prince had managed to seat himself next Gertrude, leaving Mrs Carston to the attentions of Mr Rivière. The rest of the party were composed of English visitors staying at the ' Splendide,' and the whole party numbered ten or twelve. A second glance assured him that she was even handsomer than he supposed, and, as it was one of the Princess's maxims that husband and wife were, both of them, perfectly free to receive or administer any attentions they pleased, without in-

juring their mutual relations, it followed, naturally, that he made himself agreeable.

‘I hope you and your mother are not given to nervousness,’ he asked, when it was plain that the Princess intended to keep her reputation up, ‘for my wife is a perfectly reckless driver. However, she is also the best driver I ever saw, and she has never had an accident yet.’

Gertrude shrank from his somewhat familiar scrutiny of her face, and she answered him coldly,—

‘Oh no, thanks. I am never nervous, and my mother is not either. Are you, mother?’ she asked, leaning back, and addressing her directly.

‘Not when the Princess is driving,’ said Mrs Carston, graciously, smiling at the Prince.

‘I was just telling Miss Carston there was no need to be when my wife is driving. I acknowledge it doesn’t look the safest form of amusement. Mimi, you’ll have a wheel off presently.’

‘Then we’ll go like a fox terrier when it wants to show off,’ remarked Mimi. ‘It would look rather nice, I think.’

‘I saw you two nights ago at the Cercle,’ continued the Prince to Gertrude. ‘I wanted my wife

to introduce me, but she didn't know you, she said. I suppose you haven't been here very long.'

'No; only a week,' she said, again feeling a little uneasy.

'Then, of course, we may hope that you will still remain here a considerable time.'

'I shall be here about a fortnight or three weeks more.'

'Ah! you stop here about as long as we shall,' he said; 'personally, I would stop longer, but we have to go back to Vienna for a time, and we go to England in November.'

'You hunt, I suppose,' said Gertrude, carelessly.

'My wife is very fond of it, and that is reason enough for our going. She is half English, you know,' said the Prince, making concessions to ingenuousness. 'Here we are at the lake; let me help you down; the boats are waiting, I see. Let me give you my hand.'

'Thanks, I can manage for myself,' said Gertrude, preparing to dismount.

She turned round to catch hold of the rail, and in doing so, somehow, her foot slipped off the step. The Prince had already dismounted, and was stand-

ing below. He made a sudden, quick movement towards her, and just saved her a rather nasty fall, by catching her strongly round the waist and lowering her to the ground. Poor Gertrude was furious with herself, and flushed deeply.

‘I hope you are not hurt?’ he said, bending towards her. ‘I was very fortunate in being able to save you.’

Mrs Carston saw what had happened, from the top of the drag.

‘Dear Gertrude,’ she cried, ‘you are always so precipitous—why don’t you thank the Prince?’

‘As long as Miss Carston was not precipitated, her precipitousness is harmless,’ said the Prince. ‘I am afraid you are shaken,’ he said to Gertrude.

‘Villari, you must not try to make puns in English,’ screamed Mimi; ‘go and hold the horses a minute till they’ve taken out the baskets. There’s no such word as precipitousness.’

Meanwhile Gertrude had recovered her equanimity, and confessed to herself that the Prince had merely chosen between letting herself be hurt or not hurt, and that it was hard to say why she was

angry with him. She walked to where he was standing at the horses' heads.

'I am so grateful to you,' she said ; 'you saved me a very bad fall.'

'Please don't thank me for the privilege I have had. It is for me to thank you.'

Gertrude made a great effort to conquer her increasing aversion to him, which was quite inexplicable, even to herself, and smiled.

'You are very unselfish. Do you always find it a privilege to help other people?'

'Decidedly not,' said he, looking straight at her.

Gertrude turned away, and he followed her to join the others, who were standing at a little distance.

'There are the boats,' explained the Princess, 'and as there are ten of us and three of them, we'll divide ourselves between them. We'd better take a man each to do the rowing, and if any of us like we can take an oar. I love rowing, and I know you row, Miss Carston. Your mother was telling me you were out this morning. Shall you and I go in a little boat by ourselves, and row across? Let's do that.'

The Prince remonstrated.

‘Mimi, you mustn’t take Miss Carston off all by yourself like that. It isn’t fair on the rest of us.’

Mimi looked at him with malicious amusement in her eyes.

‘Miss Carston shall decide for herself,’ she said. ‘Will you offend me or offend the Prince?’

Poor Gertrude was not used to a world where chaff and seriousness seemed so muddled up together, and where nobody cared whether you were serious or not. She was accustomed to mean what she said, and not to say a good many things she meant, whereas these people seemed to say all they meant, and only half to mean a good many things they said.

‘I’m very fond of rowing,’ she said simply. ‘I should like to go with you.’

Princess Mimi looked mischievously at her husband, and Gertrude, not knowing exactly what to do with her eyes, glanced at him too. He was waiting for that, and as their eyes met he said,—

‘You are very cruel; your thanks to me do not go beyond words.’

The Princess came to her rescue.

‘Come, Miss Carston, you and I will set off. There’s a sweet little boat there, which will suit us beautifully.’

The Princess’s method of rowing was to dip her oar into the water like a spoon very rapidly, for spasms which lasted about half a minute. In the intervals she talked to Gertrude.

‘I am so glad to be coming to England again,’ she said. ‘Villari has had a lot of tiresome business which has kept him at Vienna during this last year, and we haven’t set foot in it for sixteen months. I am tremendously patriotic; nothing in the world gives me so much pleasure as the sight of those hop-fields of Kent, with the little sheds up for hop-pickers, and the red petticoats hanging out to dry. I think I shall go and live in one. Do you suppose it would be very full of fleas? I shall build it of Keating’s powder, solidified by the Mimi process, and then it will be all right. Do come and live with me, Miss Carston. Do you know, we’ve taken a tremendous fancy to you. May I call you Gertrude? Thanks, how sweet of you. Of course you must call me Mimi.’

It was quite true that she had taken a great fancy

to Gertrude, and Gertrude, in turn, felt attracted by her. She, like others, began to discount the fact that she smoked and screamed and drove four-in-hand, in the presence of the vitality to which such things were natural and unpremeditated. There was certainly no affectation in them; she did not do them because she wished to be fast, or wished to be thought fast, but because she was fast. Between her and Mrs Rivière, Gertrude could already see, there was a great gulf fixed.

Later on in the afternoon the two strolled up higher than the others on the green slopes that rise above the Monastery, and sat down by a spring that gushed out of a rock, making a shallow, sparkling channel for itself down to the lake. The Princess had what she called a 'fit of rusticity,' which expressed itself at tea in a rapid, depreciatory sketch of all town life, in removing flies from the cream with consideration for their wings, and watching them clean themselves with sympathetic attention, and, more than all, in her taking a walk with Gertrude up the mountain side, instead of smoking cigarettes. Prince Villari had asked if he might come too, but Mimi gave him an emphatic 'No.'

Nobody had ever accused Prince Villari of having the least touch, much less a fit, of rusticity.

The Princess had the gift of prompting people so delicately, that it could hardly be called forcing, to confide in her, and so it came about that before very long she knew of the existence of our Reginald Davenport, and his relation to her companion.

Then Gertrude said suddenly,—

‘Do you know Lady Hayes?’

Mimi was startled. The question had been very irrelevant. But she answered with a laugh,—

‘No; but I am told I should not like her. They say she is too like me. But why do you ask?’

‘Reggie wrote to me about her this morning. He says she is delightful.’

‘Oh! I don’t say she isn’t,’ said the other, ‘but you see there isn’t room or time for two people like me in one place. I never have time to say all I want, and if there was somebody else like that, we shouldn’t get on at all.’

‘Oh! but Lady Hayes is usually very silent, I believe,’ said Gertrude.

‘Yes; but you have to listen to the silence of

some people, just as you have to listen to the talk of others. It takes just as much time. I expect she is one of those.'

The Princess looked at the figure beside her.

'How happy you must be,' she said with something like envy; 'and I think you will continue to be happy. And Mr Davenport is coming here, is he? You must introduce me at once, and I will give you both my blessing. That's something to look forward to. Come, we must go down, the others will be waiting.'

Mimi was rather less noisy on the way home than usual. Prince Villari remarked it, and supposed that the fit of rusticity was not yet over. She bid a very affectionate good-night to Gertrude at the door of her hotel, and asked her to come and see her in the morning, and then altered the terms of the visit, and said she would come down to their hotel herself, and hoped to find Gertrude ready for a stroll before lunch.

She remained silent at dinner, and afterwards, when she and her husband were sitting in their room by the window, to let in the cool evening breeze, he felt enough curiosity to ask,—

‘What is the matter with my charming wife that she is so silent?’

‘I was thinking about Gertrude Carston,’ said Mimi. ‘She is engaged to be married.’

Prince Villari puffed his cigar in silence for a few moments.

‘Ah! that is interesting,’ he said at length. ‘I shall come with you to-morrow to offer my felicitations. How very handsome she is.’

‘I wish you would do nothing of the sort, Villari,’ said his wife. ‘Flirt with somebody else, if you must flirt with somebody. Flirt with me, if you like.’

‘That is a most original idea,’ he said. ‘I never heard of a husband flirting with his wife before.’

‘It’s no manner of use trying to flirt with Gertrude Carston, my dear boy; so I warn you solemnly. She is awfully in love with her intended, and, in any case, she wouldn’t flirt. She will only get angry with you.’

‘She would look splendid when she was angry,’ said the Prince meditatively.

Mimi got up from her seat.

‘Look here, Villari,’ she said, ‘I don’t often ask

a favour of you, and I am not particular in general as to how you conduct yourself. I am never jealous, you know, and we have ceased to be lovers—we are excellent friends, which I think is better. As a friend, I ask you to leave her alone.'

'I never suspected you of jealousy,' he said; 'but you ought to explain to me exactly why you wish this, if you want me to do as you ask.'

'Benevolent motives, pure and simple,' said Mimi at once. 'You won't get any amusement out of it.'

'Never mind me,' murmured he.

'Very good,' continued Mimi. 'I cancel that—and she will hate it. Just leave her alone. Flirt with Mrs Rivière. She would enjoy it. You were rude to her to-day; you never spoke a word to her—good, bad or indifferent.'

'Mimi, you are inimitable,' said the Prince, looking at her with satisfaction. 'Really, you never disappoint one. I expected to find all sorts of surprises in you; but it seems I haven't got to the end of them yet. To discover such a spring of benevolence in you now is charming. Do you know I feel like your lover still.'

'Then will you do what I ask?'

‘Yes; I think I will,’ said he. ‘After all, I shall flirt with my wife a little longer.

He rose up from his chair, and took her hand in his, and raised it, lover-like, to his lips.

‘You’re a very good old boy, Villari,’ she said. ‘We’ve never yet come near the edge of a quarrel, and we’ve been married, oh! ever so long. How wise we are, aren’t we? Let me go, please. I want to write some letters. You told Mrs Rivière you’d go to the Casino with her. It’s time you were off. Be awfully charming to her, will you?’

‘I’ll let her show me to all her acquaintances, and be introduced to them all, if that will do,’ said the Prince.

‘That’s a dear,’ remarked Mimi. ‘That’ll do beautifully. Trot along!’

CHAPTER II

GERTRUDE'S pleasure at receiving the telegram announcing Reggie's immediate arrival was not untouched by surprise. The vague thoughts, which for very loyalty she would not allow to take shape in her mind, in connection with Lady Hayes, formed themselves into a dark cloud on the horizon, distant but potentially formidable. But when she came downstairs on the morning of his arrival, and saw him standing in the hall, with the early morning sunlight falling on his tall, well-made form and towering, sunny head, there was no room in her mind for more than one feeling, and she was content. He had not seen her coming downstairs, and on the bottom step she paused, held out her hands, and said,—

‘Reggie!’

That moment was one of pure and simple happi-

ness to them both. He turned and saw her, the girl to whom he had given his heart and his young love, and for him, as for her, at that moment none but the other existed. Gertrude felt that the thoughts of that golden future, which had so filled her mind one morning, as she walked down to the lake, were now beginning to be fulfilled. As for him, the chief feeling in his mind was one of passionate, unutterable relief; the long nightmare was over, for the moment he felt that childish, pure happiness of waking from a bad dream and finding morning come, and the sun shining into a dear, familiar room.

He had not had a very pleasant journey. The anger which Mrs Davenport had seen in his face, and from which she had taken comfort, burned itself out and left him face to face with blankness. His passionate desire to see Eva rekindled itself, but that was impossible, and the sight of Gertrude he felt, in another sense, was impossible too. Several times he had been on the point of turning back, but the essential weakness of his character forbade so determined a step. But certainly, at that first moment of meeting her, he felt, with that un-

questioning irresponsibility, that in natures not so sweet creates egoism, that the solution was here, and the relief was great.

‘Ah, it is good to see you, Gerty,’ he said, when the first silent greeting was over. ‘I didn’t know how much I wanted to get to you, until I saw you standing there.’

‘It was nice of you to come so soon,’ she said, drawing her arm through his, and leading him out on to the verandah; ‘but why did you come so suddenly? Nothing is wrong, I hope?’

Reggie had foreseen and dreaded this question, and he had devoted some thought to it. But Gertrude had given it a form more easy of reply than what he had anticipated.

He looked at her affectionately.

‘Nothing is wrong,’ he said with emphasis, and, to do him justice, he believed at that moment with truth.

‘Everything is as right as it can be now,’ he went on; ‘now I am here with you, and oh, Gerty, nothing else matters.’

‘No,’ she said softly; ‘nothing else matters.’

They stood there looking at each other, silent, almost

grave—for happiness is no laughing matter—until a waiter came out with a tray on which was Gertrude's breakfast. Reggie went upstairs to his room to get rid of his travel stains, and Gertrude ordered breakfast for him to be served at the table on the verandah where she had her own. But it was not to be expected that the change in Reggie which Mrs Davenport had noticed would escape her, and though, in the grave, silent joy of that first meeting, she had not consciously noticed it, she remembered it now, and it struck her exactly as it had struck Mrs Davenport.

‘He has become a man,’ she said to herself, and the thought flooded her mind with a new joy. He had said that nothing was wrong; their meeting had been all and more than she had expected, for she felt he fulfilled his part of that union of soul which she had thought of as the germ which lurked in their first months of courtship, and which she felt she had become capable of by degrees only. But, lo! he had changed too. Truly, the golden future was dawning.

Such moments are rare. We cannot live always at the full compass of our possibilities, any more

than a horse can gallop at full speed for ever. That great characteristic of the human race, limitations forbid us to walk for ever on the circumference of our circle. That most disappointing of phenomena called reaction will not be denied, and the hearts which are capable of the highest emotions in the highest degree, are not only capable, but necessarily liable to their corresponding depths. But at present, disconsolate reflections of this kind had no footing in Gertrude's mind. She knew her emotions were expanded for the present sweet moment, even to the limits of her imagination, and room for further thought there was none.

All that day and all the next day the joy grew no less deep. On the afternoon of the third day, an invitation came from Princess Villari for Mrs and Miss Carston to come to tea, also to bring Mr Davenport if he was there. Gertrude wanted to go, and so *sans dire* did her mother, and she soon convinced Reggie—who was of opinion that tea-parties were bores—that he wanted to go too. It is always flattering to the male mind to know that a lady particularly wants to see you, especially when that lady is described in so promising a

way as that in which Gertrude alluded to the Princess.

The Princess had a genius for doing things in the best possible way. If she had given a soap-bubble party, the pipes would have been amber tipped, the soap, 'Pears' scented,' and even in an informal affair of this sort, her arrangements were indubitably perfect. Her sitting-room opened on to the verandah of the hotel, which in turn communicated with the garden. Tea and light refreshments were provided in all these three charming places, on a quantity of small tables, giving unlimited opportunities for any number of *tête-à-têtes*. The steps and the verandah were bright with sweet-smelling flowers, and in the room, where their fragrance would have been overpowering, were large, cool branches of laburnum and acacia. Needless to say, she had advertised the hotel-keeper that she would be using the verandah and hotel gardens that afternoon, and that, with her compliments, those places would be '*interdits*' to any one but her guests.

The Princess was extremely glad to see Reggie, and she couldn't help congratulating him, if he

wouldn't think it very interfering of her, but she had made great friends with dear Gertrude, and Gertrude had told her all about it. And here was Mrs Rivière coming, and did Reggie know her ; she was a great friend of Lady Hayes, whom she was sure he must have met in London.

Gertrude was standing some little way off, but she heard the name mentioned, and she could not help turning half round and looking at Reggie. Reggie's back, however, was towards her, and he was making his bow to Mrs Rivière.

Mrs Rivière was very busy about this time on modelling herself after the Princess, but having nothing in her composition that could be construed into tact or ability, the result was that the imitation was limited to talking in a loud voice, and saying anything that came into her head.

'Charmed to meet you,' she was telling Reggie in shrill tones, 'and all the men here are going to be dreadfully jealous of you at once. Your reputation has preceded you ; it came to me by the last mail ; how nobody could get in a word edge-ways with Lady Hayes, because she was always talking to you, and how your photograph stood

on the mantelpiece in her room, and she would never allow the housemaids to dust it, but she dusted it herself every morning with a pink silk handkerchief, also belonging, or belonging once, to you. Oh, don't deny it, Mr Davenport—and how she sat out four, or was it forty—I think forty—forty dances with you at some ball one night.'

Mrs Rivière paused for breath, well satisfied with herself. Her monologue had been quite as rapid as the Princess's, and, she flattered herself, quite as fascinating. Mimi had moved away when Mrs Rivière came up, and was talking to Gertrude, a few yards off. But Gertrude did not hear what she was saying, for the shrill tones of Mrs Rivière's voice rose high above the surrounding babble of conversation, and seemed as if they were spoken to her alone. Reggie's back was still turned towards her; his face she could not see.

Reggie was conscious that Gertrude was within hearing, conscious also that Mrs Rivière did not know his relations to her. Eva's name had caused the blood to rush up into his face, and Mrs Rivière had been delighted with the success

of her speech. The Princess had caught a few of her last words, and, looking up at Gertrude, she saw that she had heard too. She wheeled suddenly about, and approached Mrs Rivière.

‘There are simply twenty thousand people whom I don’t know here,’ she said; ‘you really must come and introduce me to them. Who is that there in a green hat with little purple, bobbly things on it? I want to know anyone who wears purple and green. They must be so very brave; I respect brave people enormously. Come and introduce me. Villari has asked a lot of people I never saw before. I shall talk to him about the woman with purple bobbles!’

She drew Mrs Rivière away, and Reggie turned round and found himself with Gertrude.

‘I heard what that woman said to you,’ said Gertrude, simply. ‘It is only fair to tell you that.’

She waited, looking at him expectantly, but he remained silent.

‘Reggie,’ she said, touching his arm.

He raised his eyes and looked at her.

‘Come and walk round the garden, Gerty,’ he said. ‘I have something to say to you.’

Gertrude's loyalty struggled again and again conquered.

‘What you have to say to me can be said here, surely,’ she said gently and trustfully. ‘I do not even want you to deny the truth or any of the truth of what that woman said. I am ashamed of having told you that I heard. Forgive me instantly, please, Reggie, and then we'll have a stroll.’

Reggie paused, and it was a cruel moment for Gertrude.

‘Yes, I will say it here,’ he went on at length. ‘Do you remember my telling you, three days ago, on the morning I came, that everything was right now I was with you? That was true.’

‘And it is true, and you have forgiven me?’ asked Gertrude.

Was the ghost of Venusberg not laid yet? Else what was that murmur which Reggie had heard again, when Mrs Rivière spoke of Eva, like the burden of a remembered song?—‘She is not gone really, she has only gone elsewhere?’ Was that the smell of red geraniums borne along from the flower-beds by the warm wind, faint, acrid,

as you smell them in the dusty window-boxes of the great squares and streets in London? There should be no geraniums here, only wild flowers—meadow-sweet, dog-rose, violet—

The sound of Gertrude's voice had long died away, but Reggie stood silent. An overpowering feeling of anxiety swept over her; the trust that she had felt in his assurance that all was right was suddenly covered by a rolling breaker of doubt. And that silence cost her more than any speech.

At last it became unbearable.

'Speak, Reggie,' she cried, 'whatever you have to tell me.'

'Come, let us go round the garden, where we can be quiet,' he said, and together, in silence, they followed a path leading down between dark ever-green bushes to the garden gate.

They sat down on a garden seat where they were hidden from the crowd gathering on the lawn.

'Let us sit here, Reggie,' she said. 'Just tell me, and when you have said "yes," forgive me for asking that it is true that everything is right.'

'Ah! God knows whether it is true or false,' he cried.

For him again, the army of Venus laughed and rioted as it had rioted once before in the crowded opera house. Again a woman, pale, wonderful, with dark eyes, sat beside him, beating time listlessly to the music with her feathered fan. She had worn that night her great diamond necklace, and the jewels had flashed and glittered in the bright light, till he could scarcely believe they were not living things. And he had thought it was all over, past and dead. Oh no! 'she is not gone really; she has only gone elsewhere . . . she often turns up again.'

Gertrude felt her heart give one great leap of strained suspense, and then stand still for fear.

'I don't understand,' she cried. 'Tell me all about it, and tell me quickly. Yet, yet, you said it was all right, didn't you, Reggie, and you wouldn't tell me a lie? Ah! say it is all right again, say it now. I cannot bear it. I should like to kill that woman for what she said. It was not true, was it? Tell me it was not true.'

The ghost of Venusberg loomed large before Reggie's eyes, blotting out the green bank of trees in front, the pure sky overhead, the mountains sleeping in the still afternoon, blotting out even the

tall, English figure by him, leaning forward towards him in an agony of fear, hope, despair; he saw the gleam of electric light, the gleam of jewels, the gleam of another woman's eyes.

'I will tell you all,' he said. 'I saw Lady Hayes for the first time after you had left London, and from that time till four days ago I have seen her constantly. Then one night she showed me she was like all those women she moved among, and from whom I thought her so different. She was like Mrs Rivière, Princess Villari—all is one after that. It was at the opera, at Tannhäuser—'

The intensity of Gertrude's suspense relaxed a little. It was all over, then—

'Ah! we heard the overture together. Do you remember? You said you did not like wicked people.'

'Yes, I know. When I saw that, at that moment I loathed her. She had said to me things no woman should say, and when I heard the overture I understood, and told her she was a wicked woman. And not till then—you *must* believe me when I tell you this—not till I had vowed never to see her again, did I know—my God! that I

should say these things to you—did I know I loved her. I have been through heaven and hell, and they are both hell.'

Reggie paused.

'That is not all,' said Gertrude.

The suspense was over, and despair is as calm or calmer than joy.

'I couldn't leave her like that,' he went on. 'I could not hate her utterly at the first moment that I knew I loved her, and I wrote to her asking her forgiveness, and she told me—she wrote to me, that she never would see me again, that I had behaved unpardonably. She made me angry. And I came straight off here the same day.'

'And now?' asked Gertrude.

'God only knows what now,' said he, leaning his head on his hands.

There was a long silence, and the babble of laughter and talk came to them from the lawn which was filling fast. Then Reggie heard Gertrude's voice, very low and very tender, speaking to him,—

'Poor Reggie, poor dear boy. I am very sorry for you.'

She laid her hand on his knee, and then, drawing closer to him, as he sat with down-bent head, leaned forward to kiss him. But in a moment she recollected herself, and by an effort of supremest delicacy, before he was conscious what she had intended, drew back with one long look at him, in which her soul said 'Farewell.'

She had something more to say, but it was not easy for her to say it. The uprootal of all one loves best makes it difficult to talk just then. But easy or not, it had to be said, and it was better to say it now.

'I am sure you told me the truth,' she began, 'when I met you three days ago, and you said everything was right. We know nothing for certain, do we; we can only say what we think, and I am sure you thought that. Anyhow, these last three days have been very sweet. And now, Reggie, there is only one thing more to say you are free, absolutely free I am not so selfish as to wish to bind you to me I love you surely I may tell you once more what I have told you so often I love you with all my heart and soul, and I do not think I shall change. But we must

wait. If that day comes when you say to me, "Will you have me?" I shall say "Yes." But, you must say it in the same spirit in which I shall say "Yes." You know what that means, don't you? Ah, Reggie, I don't blame you. How could I do that?'

'Gerty, Gerty,' cried he, 'I would give all the world to be able to say that to you. I know what you mean. But I am helpless, dumb, blind, deaf. I can do nothing. I am tossed about. I don't know what is happening to me. And that you should suffer too.'

Gertrude smiled, ever so faintly.

'It's a difficult world, isn't it?' she said, 'but it has its ups and downs. I have been very happy almost all my life.'

'Forgive me, forgive me,' he cried. 'Gerty, say you don't hate me.'

A deep tremor ran through her. When she met his imploring gaze, the desire of her young, strong love to gather him into her arms, to comfort him, to *make* him feel the depths of her yearning for him, to lose all for one moment in one last, claspng embrace was very hard to resist. 'What harm is done?'

whispered one voice within her, but another said, 'He is not yours ; he belongs to the woman he loves. For one moment she hesitated : tenderness, love, memory, wrestled with that other voice, but prevailed not. There was that within her stronger than them all.

'I love you more than all the world,' she said, 'and there is nothing to forgive.'

For one moment she stood looking at him, treasuring the seconds that passed too quickly, knowing that before a short minute had passed that last look would be over. Such a pause is purely instinctive, and when instinct tells us that it is time to take up one's life again, it is impossible to stay longer.

That moment came all too soon, and Gertrude spoke again.

'Come, we must be going back. They will wonder where we are. Ah ! there is the Princess. Reggie, pick me that tea-rose.'

The Princess felt vaguely reassured. The look in Gertrude's face when she heard what Mrs Rivière was saying was not pleasant, and it remained in her mind with some vividness. But the last remark

which she had overheard was distinctly encouraging.

'Really, you two people are too bad,' she said. 'You are here to amuse me and my guests, and show these little French people how magnificent, clean, nice, English boys and girls are. I've been entertaining a lot of stupid people, whom I didn't want to see, and who wouldn't have wanted to see me if I hadn't been a Highness. But I've got a great notion of my duty as a hostess. Didn't somebody write an "Ode to Duty"? You might as well write an "Ode to Dentistry." They are both very unpleasant, but they both keep you straight.'

She led the way back to the lawn, and Gertrude and Reggie followed.

Society may be a farce, but it is a very grim farce. The devout but rejected lover, who has proposed to the lady of his love beneath an idyllic moon, goes to bed that night as usual, and if, in the agony of his mind, he has forgotten to take the links out of his shirt in the evening, he will have to do it in the morning. The bows of his evening shoes will want untying just as much that night as on any other, and next morning he will find himself at the breakfast-table

just as usual, having washed and brushed his teeth and combed his hair. The unkempt, haggard lovers of fiction have no existence in real life. Edwin does not refuse to shave because Angelina will have none of him, nor does he use his razor, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, for any more anatomical process than that of removing his superfluous hair. And Gertrude did not go home in floods of tears and refuse to be comforted, but she talked to several old acquaintances, and made several new ones, and quite a number of people said, 'What a delightful girl Miss Carston is.' But her grief was none the less deep for that.

Among the old acquaintances, Prince Villari chose to number himself.

'I hear Mr Davenport, whom my wife says you were expecting, has arrived,' said he. 'Would you do me the pleasure to introduce him to me?'

Reggie was standing near Gertrude at the time, and she said,—

'Reggie, Prince Villari desires me to do you the honour to introduce you to him.'

'Mrs Carston has been so good as to accept a most informal invitation to dinner from my wife

for to-night,' continued the Prince. 'She said we might hope that you and Mr Davenport would join us too.'

Gertrude did not flinch.

'I should be charmed,' she said. 'Reggie, you are not engaged, are you?'

The Prince smiled in anticipation of a 'sweet, secret speech,' but he was disappointed. Reggie considered it an honour, and ventured to inquire at what time they should come.

'My wife has refused to allow Mrs Carston to go home. She says it would be too cruel to entail that double journey over the most dusty mile of road in Europe twice in one day. May I add,' he said, turning to Gertrude, 'that it would also be too cruel if you went. It is already half-past six, and we dine in an hour. I see the people are all going. Let me show you the garden. Ah! I see Mr Davenport has found an acquaintance. Won't you come with me down as far as the gate? There is a seat there commanding a lovely view.'

Ah! but how Gertrude's heart knew that seat and that lovely view! Had she not looked on it once already this afternoon?

The Prince was disposed to be particularly amiable.

‘I am sure you must love this view,’ he said. ‘I know it’s a great bore having views shown you, and that sort of thing, but I must say I think this view really is enchanting! Those mountains there look so fine in this evening light! They always remind me of the English lake scenery. My wife raves about English scenery; she says it is part of the only satisfactory system of life in the world, and belongs to the same order of things as roast beef and five o’clock tea, and daisies and large cart-horses. Ah! here is Mrs Rivière; I suppose she has been looking at the scenery, too.’

As a matter of fact, Mrs Rivière had been doing nothing of the sort. She had come to a secluded corner, in order to smoke a cigarette and carry on a promising flirtation with a somewhat mature French count. But the mature French count had gone his way, and she was finishing her cigarette alone.

‘I have been looking for that fascinating and wicked Englishman,’ she said. ‘Yes; isn’t the view charming? You really don’t know, Miss

Carston, how dreadfully you are compromising yourself by going about with him. Take my word for it, as a married woman, that it endangers your reputation. Really, I don't know what young people are coming to. It's perfectly frightful. I heard all about him from a very dear friend of mine in London.'

Gertrude felt an overwhelming desire to stop this sort of thing. Mrs Rivière had run herself out by this time, and stood taking little puffs from her cigarette, and thinking how very Mimi-ish she was becoming. Gertrude stood by her a moment in silence, and Prince Villari thought the contrast between them very striking indeed. There was an expression in Gertrude's face which puzzled him somewhat, and he waited in patience for an explanation which he felt sure was forthcoming.

'You mean Reggie Davenport?' she said at length.

'Reggie!' screamed Mrs Rivière, 'really you are getting on at a tremendous pace. I honestly tremble for you.'

'Your fears are misplaced,' said Gertrude, look-

ing down at her. 'I have been engaged to him for eighteen months.'

She turned round after saying these words, and walked slowly back, the Prince by her side, without troubling herself to see the effect produced on Mrs Rivière. They walked in silence for some yards, and then the Prince said,—

'May I offer you my congratulations on the double event—on your engagement, and your defeat of Mrs Rivière? It was really very fine.'

'Thanks,' said she, without tremor or raised colour. 'I don't like Mrs Rivière. I think she is insupportable. Ah! there is Reggie. May I go and speak to him?'

The Prince walked gracefully off in another direction. He never made himself *de trop*.

'Reggie,' said she, 'it was necessary, I found just now, to let Mrs Rivière believe we were engaged, and I think, perhaps, we had better not let it be known what has happened just yet. I have good reason for it. But tell your mother. I am tired. I think I shall go indoors. Stop and talk to the Prince.'

By a merciful arrangement of Nature's, a great

shock is never entirely comprehended by the victim all at once. A numbness always succeeds it first, and the torn and bleeding tissues recover not altogether, but one by one. At present Gertrude was conscious that she did not wholly take in all that had happened. Volition and action in small things went on still with mechanical regularity, and it is doubtful whether any of those about her saw any difference. She wandered into the Princess's room which opened on to the verandah, and was pleased to find it untenanted. She threw herself down in a chair, and took up the paper, which had just come in by the mail. There was a famine somewhere, and a war somewhere else, Mr Gladstone had gone to Biarritz, the Prince of Wales had opened a Working - Man's Institute and Lord Hayes was dead. His death, it appeared, was sudden.

The paper slipped from Gertrude's knees and fell crackling to the ground. So he was dead, and his wife a widow, like herself, she felt. She sat there for some time without stirring. So Lady Hayes, then, was free, and Reggie, as she had told him herself that afternoon, was free too. How very simple, after all, are the big problems of life, and

how very cruel. Surely Eva could not help loving him. Anyone who knew him must love him; who could tell that half so well as herself, who loved him best? Was he not lovable? Surely, for she loved him. And what would Mrs Rivière say? Her thoughts wandered blindly on, touching a hundred different points with accuracy, but without feeling, till they all centred round the main event.

Ah! the cruelty of it, the diabolical chance which placed these things on the devil's chessboard, for the devil to move and manœuvre with. She was to be the victim, it seemed; she was to give up the object of her long, tender love to another woman, more beautiful, less scrupulous than herself, and her jealousy sprang to birth, full armed, terrible. Did the irony of fate go so far as this, that that woman, for whom she had herself declared Reggie free, should be free also? Her rejection of him—that was nothing, a wile to bring him back more humbly to her feet. Ah, yes, they would be married in St Peter's, Eaton Square, probably, and Gertrude would go there, and sing 'The Voice that breathed o'er Eden,' and eat their—his—wedding-cake, and be introduced to the bride, and throw a slipper

after them for luck. Yes, that was all extremely likely, one might almost say imminent. At this point Gertrude began to perceive that she was getting hysterical, and with a violent effort of self-control, she got up and walked to the window. The sun was just setting, and over the lawn strolled a tall figure, preceded by a still taller shadow. Reggie's eyes were bent to the ground, and he walked up close to the verandah without seeing her. The sight of that familiar, best-loved figure produced another mood in Gertrude; she watched it silently for a time, and then said to herself under her breath,—

‘Pray, God, let her love him very much;’ and then aloud, ‘Reggie.’

At the sound of his name he looked up and saw her.

‘Come in here a minute,’ she said. ‘I have something to tell you.’

Reggie nodded assent, and came along the verandah, until he reached the low, French window opening on to it.

‘Come in,’ said Gertrude, ‘it’s the Princess’s room, but she isn’t here. Sit down there.’

Gertrude paused.

‘The paper has just come,’ she said at length. ‘There is something I have read which I wish to tell you, Reggie. It affects you very deeply—I have just read it. Lord Hayes is dead.’

‘Ah, God!—’

The exclamation burst from him involuntarily. He could have checked it no more than a man can help wincing at a sudden, unexpected blow, or starting at a sudden noise. But into those two words he had cast all the cargo of his soul—hope, longing, love. Gertrude had heard them, had comprehended them, had swallowed the bitter draught.

A moment afterwards he saw that he had told her all, more convincingly than he had done even this afternoon, for he saw she realised it to the full.

‘Ah, Gerty, what can I do?’ he said, when the silence had become unbearable. ‘You know how it is with me. How can I help it? I wish I were dead, though the gates of hell were yawning to receive me.’

‘You did not wish you were dead two months ago,’ she said with a flash of scorn, ‘not even

though the gates of heaven were open to receive you. You are not so easily contented now.'

Reggie looked piteously at her.

'I know. I deserve all you could say of me. Much more than you ever would. I am a brute, a villain—I deserve to be shot. Yet you did not speak like that this afternoon; I am glad you have said it, though; I don't feel less guilty, God knows! but I am not so bad as not to feel thankful for any punishment.'

'Let us say good-bye now,' said Gertrude. 'We shall not meet again like this.'

She held out her hand to him, but volunteered no more intimate embrace. He grasped it, held it for a moment, and let it drop. Even the touch of hand had been something sacred before to him and her, he felt, but there was something dead between them; her hand was as another's. But to Gertrude that rush of memories was too great. Her strength had been too severely taxed already.

'Ah, Reggie,' she cried, 'do you leave me like this?'

'God help you!' he said, 'and me too.'

'Reggie, my darling,' she cried suddenly, 'shall

that woman stand between you and me? Did you not promise me your love? Where are those promises? This is all a dream. Come to me again as you were once. You did not love anyone but me, you said—and once you told me you disliked wicked people. What has happened to those words of yours? Were they not true? It is a pity if they were not, for I have written them on my heart. Ah, my darling, my darling—' She threw her arms round him in a last embrace. 'Reggie, dear,' she whispered, 'this is good-bye. I did not mean what I said just now. I did not know what I was saying. That was the best of me that spoke this afternoon when I said you were free. You are quite free. I hope she will love you as much . . . as much as I have done—as I do. That will be enough. And now go. Leave me by myself. Good-bye, dear ; good-bye.'

She went with him on to the verandah, where the dusk was already falling, and as soon as he was outside the room, she turned quickly from him and went back, closing the glass door after her.

CHAPTER III

LORD HAYES was buried with his fathers and forefathers in the little churchyard at Hayes, and after the funeral Eva came back again to her London house. Mrs Grampound came to see her occasionally, was tearful and voluble, and could hardly conceal her satisfaction at the handsome settlements Lord Hayes had made on his widow.

‘So thoughtful of him,’ she would say, wiping her eyes, ‘to leave you the London house for life. He knew that you could not do without a few months in London every year; and the villa at Algiers, too, for the winter, in memory of the honeymoon. So unselfish!’

Mrs Grampound seemed to think that his lordship’s disembodied spirit might have preferred to keep the villa at Algiers to itself, and that the fact that he had left it to his widow seemed to

imply that he renounced all rights of visiting these particular glimpses of the moon. But Eva assented, with the ghost of a smile, as the impossible interpretation occurred to her.

Reggie's letter to Mrs Davenport, telling her that his engagement with Gertrude had been broken off, had arrived, and it was not very pleasant reading. He mentioned that this was prior to the news of Lord Hayes's death, and that he was coming back to England; and with all his old frankness, he said that he had written to Eva a letter of sympathy on her husband's death.

But if Reggie's letter gave pain to Mrs Davenport, not to mention that Gertrude was not altogether happy just now, surely there was the corresponding balance somewhere. Eva, for instance—things were taking a fresh turn, were they not, for her? Her husband was just dead—that was true; but though the loss of a husband is not, in the general way, a matter for congratulation, her case was a little exceptional. And this morning a letter had come for her from someone she was very fond of, saying a few words for the sake of decency, and a few other words which, for the

sake of decency, had better have been left unsaid. Reggie had told Eva that all was over between himself and Gertrude, and that he was coming back to London. The letter ended almost imperiously, 'I shall come to see you—you *shall* see me.'

Yet Eva was not the owner of the balance of happiness to make all square. How was that? But Eva was very conscious herself, as she sat with Reggie's letter in her hand, why she was not happy. Reggie was coming to offer himself, body and soul, to her, and there was nothing in the world that she desired but to give herself, body and soul, to him. It seemed very simple. Unfortunately it was only more impossible.

She had decided only a week ago that he was happier, or would be happier with another than with her. She knew it, she knew it; she was convinced of it by instinct and reasoning alike. It seemed to her that there was nothing she knew except that—that, and a certain dull remorse when she thought of that moment, when she had found the thing, which had been her husband, lying like a broken doll in the dark room. She wished she had made more of that bad job; he was so weak,

so inadequate, surely it had not been worth while to spar with one so immeasurably her inferior. And he had been very kind to her, as kind as she would let him. He had been like a little dog, which had been purely amiable at first, but had got to snap instinctively when it was approached, from the certainty that it was going to be teased. She recalled that shrinking, hunted look that she had seen so often on his face when he had snapped at her and she had turned on him with a whip. To do her justice, the provocations, or, at any rate, the challenge, had usually been on his side, but after all, would it not have been better so many times to have let it pass—not to have slashed so savagely? Ah, well, he was dead; Eva envied him now.

For the road to her happiness was as impassable as ever; her husband's death had made no difference to that. She knew that Reggie's best chance of happiness was not with her, but with another, and, unfortunately for Eva, she found that this fact could not be overlooked. And that necessity of securing his happiness came first; it was the most essential part of her love for him; the impossibility she had

felt on that morning after they had seen Tannhauser, or rather heard the overture together, of doing anything that was not for the best of his happiness, as far as in her and in her sober judgment lay, remained as impossible as ever. The existence of her husband, she felt then, was altogether a smaller matter. If she had felt it good that she and Reggie should love one another, she would have been content to go on living as they had lived before, seeing each other in ballrooms, in crowded dining-rooms, in any publicity, just touching his hand, just reading that secret knowledge in his eyes and she knew that he would have waited indefinitely as blissfully as herself. But her knowledge of herself and him rendered that impossible, and it was impossible still. Surely it was very hard; she did not ask for much, and that little was infinitely impossible.

Meanwhile, the hours were bringing Reggie closer to London, and closer to her. 'I shall come and see you—you *shall* see me!' The words rang in her head, till it seemed the whole air held nothing but them. That imperious note, the first she had heard from him, was terribly dear to her, as it is to all men and women, when the one they love commands

that which they long to do. He was changed, Mrs Davenport had said ; he had become a man. Eva felt in his words that the change had come—he spoke to her as a man to a woman. He pleaded no longer, he demanded, he announced his claims. She pictured him coming to her, bold in the assurance of his love. ‘You are mine,’ he would say, ‘you are mine, and I am yours. Let us come away together. Ah! but you shall come; you dare not say “no.”’

Against the sight of him, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, Eva knew she would be powerless. The impossibilities on which she dwelt would sink, she well knew, into nothing by the side of that one great impossibility—that of resisting his claims when he came to seek and have her. Surely nothing on earth, not duty, nor unselfishness, nor wisdom, was so strong as Love, the soft, delicate-winged Love, which neither strove nor wept, but only smiled and smiled, until its claims, its claims in full, were willingly poured into its outstretched hand.

Eva rose from where she had been sitting, and walked up and down the room. Dressed in black from head to foot, she looked like an image of de-

spair. She looked round the room, not hers, she felt, but his. That was the chair where he used to sit; the last day he had been there, he had pushed it back into the window and had sat in the sun, because he said he had a cold. He had been smoking a cigarette and had put it down on the window sill, where it had made the paint blister and burn. She had brought him a little Benares ware ash-tray, to put it in after that. Ah! there was the ash-tray, with the stump of a cigarette still in it. The servants ought to have cleared it away—and yet—well, perhaps it was too small to notice. In any case, she would not speak about it. No, on the whole she would speak about it, and she rang the bell. They should dust the room more carefully, she said to the man; that cigarette end had been there a week. After all, it did not matter, she added, as she took the ash-tray up. ‘No, leave it where it is; but let the room be dusted more carefully another time.’ Poor, momentous little cigarette-end!

He will see her, will he? Ah! but he shall not. Eva, who had always felt herself so strong, was suddenly weak. If she knew that he was there, was waiting to know if he could see her, how could

she say she would not see him, and if she saw him, how could she not yield? It was impossible, impossible. Meanwhile, she had a day and a night in which to decide what to do. He would not be in London till to-morrow morning. Many things may happen in a day or a night. She might go away, away somewhere where he would never know and could never follow her. And where in the world was that? Where would not she follow him? Perhaps nowhere in the world, out of the world somewhere—perhaps—perhaps. . . .

There was a piece of green, unturned grass next the grave where her husband lay, in that peaceful churchyard where the trees sang low together in the wind. How would it do to go there, to be quite quiet at last? 'Perchance to dream?' Yes; but surely if she dreamed at all, she would dream of Reggie. One might do worse, she thought, than dream of him.

How odd that she had not thought of this before! It was so very simple, so very satisfactory. She only cared for one thing in this world, and that she could not have. So why wait here?

But he must never know—that would spoil it all. He must never even suspect. Eva had an intense horror of anything like melodrama, and she wished everything to be as natural as possible. If only she could hire a madman from a lunatic asylum to shoot her—no, shooting would not do—it was noisy, messy, a hundred things it should not be. Surely doctors knew plenty of ways by which one could glide quietly out of the world without suspicion—they knew so many ingenious devices by which they can keep us in the world, that they must know some to let us out. Some clean, soothing drug which presented no traces at a *post-mortem* diagnosis—that was the word, was it not? Eva smiled when she pictured herself going to a doctor and asking for a drug of this description. A suspicious mind might perhaps attach undue importance to such a visit, if made a few hours before her death. What fools people were!

Eva pondered, till after a moment a sudden thought struck her. Was not suicide, of a kind, more misleading to those—to him to whom she wished it to be misleading, than death from appar-

ently natural causes? Her husband had died four days before, and, nominally, she was a more or less broken-hearted widow; to Reggie, at least, broken-hearted enough, for it was part of the concealment which she had practised to him, to hide her relations with her husband, and when she decided to let him know the rest of her, that was a side issue which she had not shown him. Would not the self-sought death of a heart-broken widow be the most complete disguise to her action, far more complete than the clumsy death by pistols or overdoses? 'It is always a good thing to add details,' thought Eva to herself. The worst of it was that such a death was somewhat melodramatic; but when the actor quits the boards for ever, it may be excusable that he makes one concession, in spite of his own distaste, to set the audience in a roar. Yes, she would have it so.

Lord Hayes used to dabble in chemistry in an amateur way, and Eva remembered his showing her, in his laboratory at Aston, a little bottle full of a harmless-looking liquid, the smell of which reminded her at first of soft cool peaches, but afterwards of the almond icing on the top of

wedding-cakes. He had told her that it was prussic acid, and that one drop of it on the tongue would kill a man. She remembered the incident clearly, because when she smelled it she had shuddered, and had thought of her own wedding-cake. The bottle was sure to be there still—it stood on the second shelf to the right as you opened the door of the laboratory, and it had a large, red label on it. It was curious how accurately the whole thing came back to her.

The bottle was at Aston, and he was buried in the churchyard there. She regretted the necessity of melodrama, but she would not be alive to regret it afterwards. Eva had no fear, only a longing to get it over—to be quite sure that nothing would stop her carrying out her intention of putting herself out of the reach of him she loved. She would go down to Aston that afternoon; meanwhile, there were three or four hours to be spent in London. Well, there were very few preparations to make. When we take that longest journey of all, there is no packing to be done, no arrangements to be made, as when we go away for a three days' visit. All arrangements are made for us; death pro-

vides us with an excellent courier who will forget nothing.

There were just two notes she wished to write—one to Mrs Davenport, saying that she had heard from Reggie, to say he was coming back to London, and that he wished to see her; that she had given him his *congé* once for all, and had no intention of seeing him, and that it would save her trouble if Mrs Davenport would communicate this to him.

It was not a very easy note to write for many reasons, but the other was even harder; it was to Gertrude Carston, and ran as follows:—

‘You will wonder what I, of all women in the world, can have to say to you. Do not resent my writing till you have read. I have done you a cruel wrong and I am sorry for it. I allowed Reggie Davenport to fall in love with me, when I might have stopped it. If I had cared for him it would have been different, for my husband is dead, and he would have married me. In that case I should not have been sorry as I am now. But I never cared for him at all; I did it thoughtlessly, and, as far as I had any motive at all, because

it amused me. My husband was the only man I ever cared for; he is dead and I wish I were dead too. It is but poor amends that I can make, but this I promise you, that I will never see Reggie Davenport again. Be very patient with him; he will love you as well as you love him, and that I know is not a little. He will come back to you and you will not hate me then.

‘I wish I could have seen you to tell you these things. I think you would have believed me; and I must ask you to believe me now. You will have heard of my husband’s death. May you never know what that means. If you like, show Mr Davenport what I have written to you; it will be good that he should know that I never cared for him.

‘I am not so bad as you think; I did my best to stop him caring for me, when we saw Tannhäuser together; he went away to you, I know, next morning, and I hoped that that would have been the end. Perhaps, if you saw me, you would be sorry for me now. Above all, remember he will come back to you; it will be with you as if I had never come between you. The fault was mine, do not cast it up to him.’

This letter took some time in the writing. It was not easy to write, but when it was done, Eva closed it for fear of drawing back, and sent both off at once to the post. She longed to finish some one of those things that lay before her to do, so that she could not go back from finishing them all. She was afraid of being weak, but not from fear of death. It was far easier to die than to live with that impassable barrier between her and happiness.

She arrived at Aston about four o'clock. She had sent a telegram to the house saying that she was coming for a few nights, and a carriage was at the station to meet her. She went first of all to the little laboratory opening off what had been her husband's study, and found that she had remembered the place where the bottle stood, with its red label. She uncorked it to make sure it was right. Yes, the almond on the top of wedding-cakes—her wedding-cake—it was exactly that smell. Then she drew her black veil over her face and went out again. There were certain grimly comic details which she had determined to go through, in order to lend probability to her act, and, with this purpose,

she went into the hothouses, and the gardeners who were working saw her pick an armful of delicate orchids and white lilies. She tore the plants up like one possessed, and with her load of sweet-smelling whiteness, they saw her go down the path that led to the churchyard.

There were several loiterers there, among them the old sexton, who remembered afterwards that a lady, dressed in black, scattered a mass of flowers over Lord Hayes's grave, and then threw herself down on the fresh-turned earth, and lay there for half an hour or it might have been more. He knew her to be Lady Hayes, and when he went away, for the dusk was falling, he left her still there.

But when the sexton had gone, Eva got up.

'One scene more of this weary farce,' she said half aloud. 'Ah, Reggie, Reggie, may you never know!'

In the gloaming she went back to the tall house, standing stately among its terraces and garden beds. The sun had sunk; only in the west was a great splash of crimson, the nightingales were singing in the elm trees, and white-winged moths fluttered about over the flower-beds. As she

entered, she turned once more to look over the peaceful, unconscious earth. The river lay like a chain of crimson pools among the trees below the meadow; on the far bank was a brown-faced country lad fishing, and nearer, in the hay-fields, were a few belated labourers returning from their work. Across the river she could see the red walls of her old home, and the flower-beds gleaming in the light of the sunken sun. Then, for the first moment, a sudden spasm of regret, of longing, and of horror for what she was going to do came over her. It would have been better to have finished that last act at the grave itself, but an unaccountable repugnance to being found by the first passer-by had prevented her.

Next moment she had swept it away. Surely she was not going to turn coward now. She turned, and passed through the study, with step as firm as ever, and with all her indolent, unrivalled grace of movement, into the laboratory beyond.

THE END.

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OCTOBER 1893

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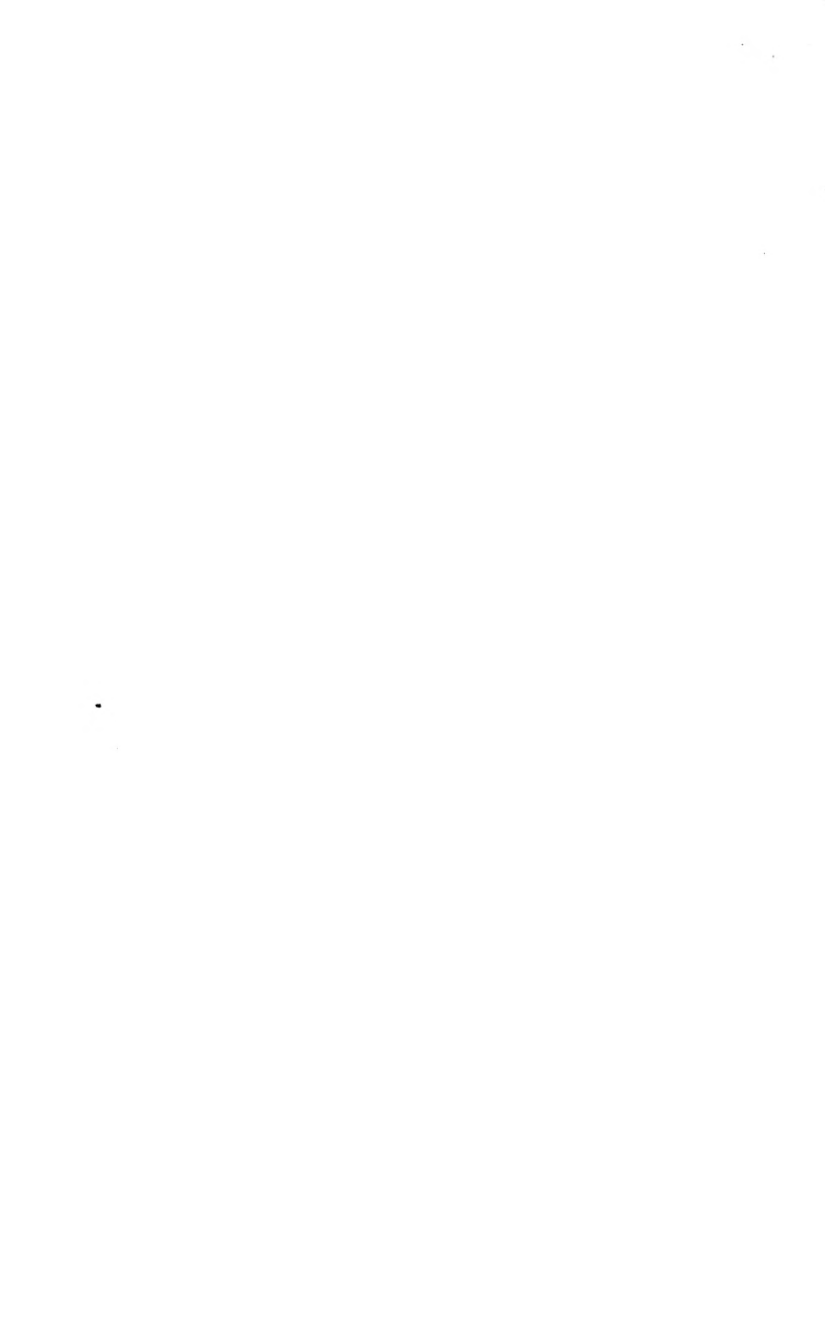
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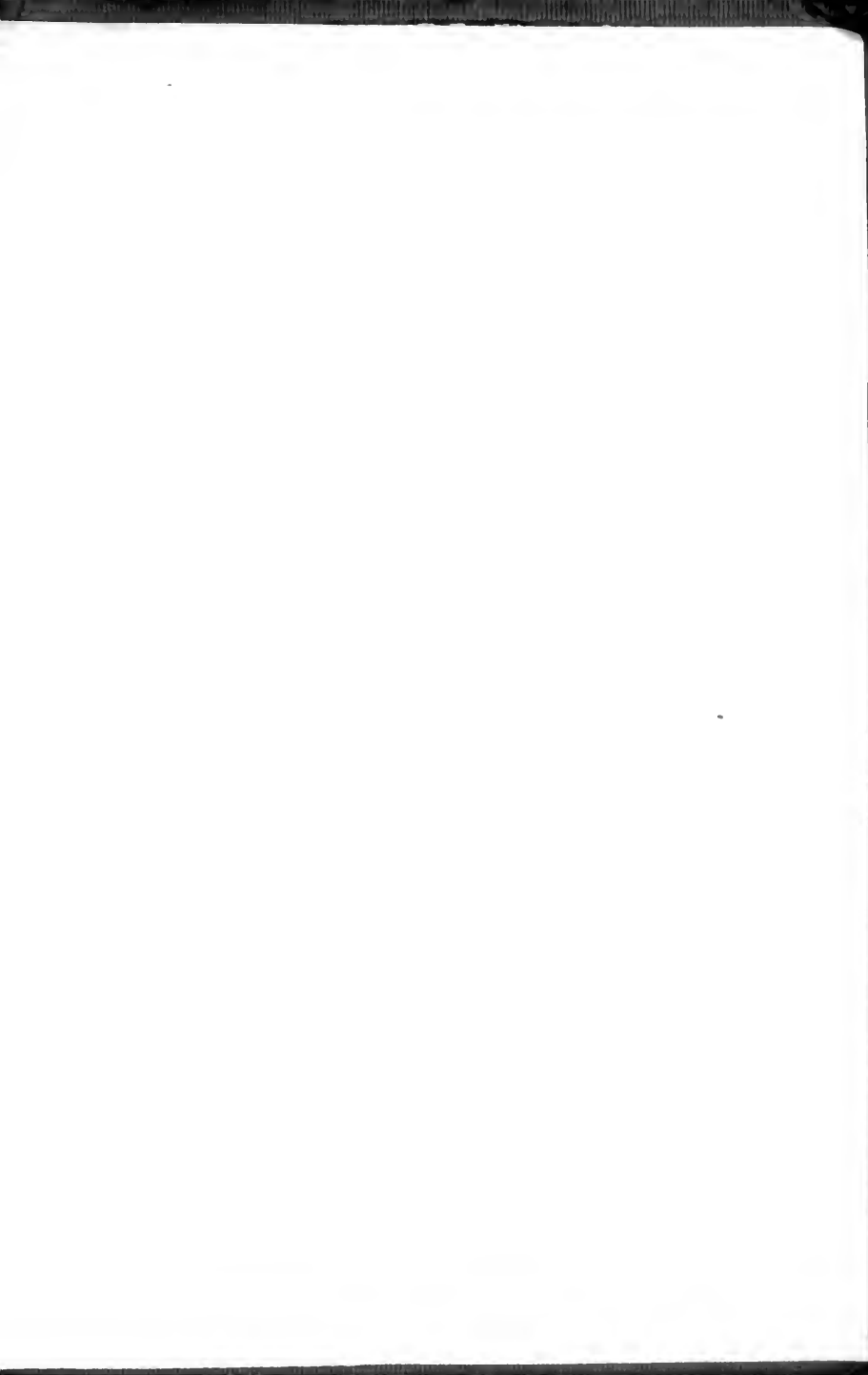
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